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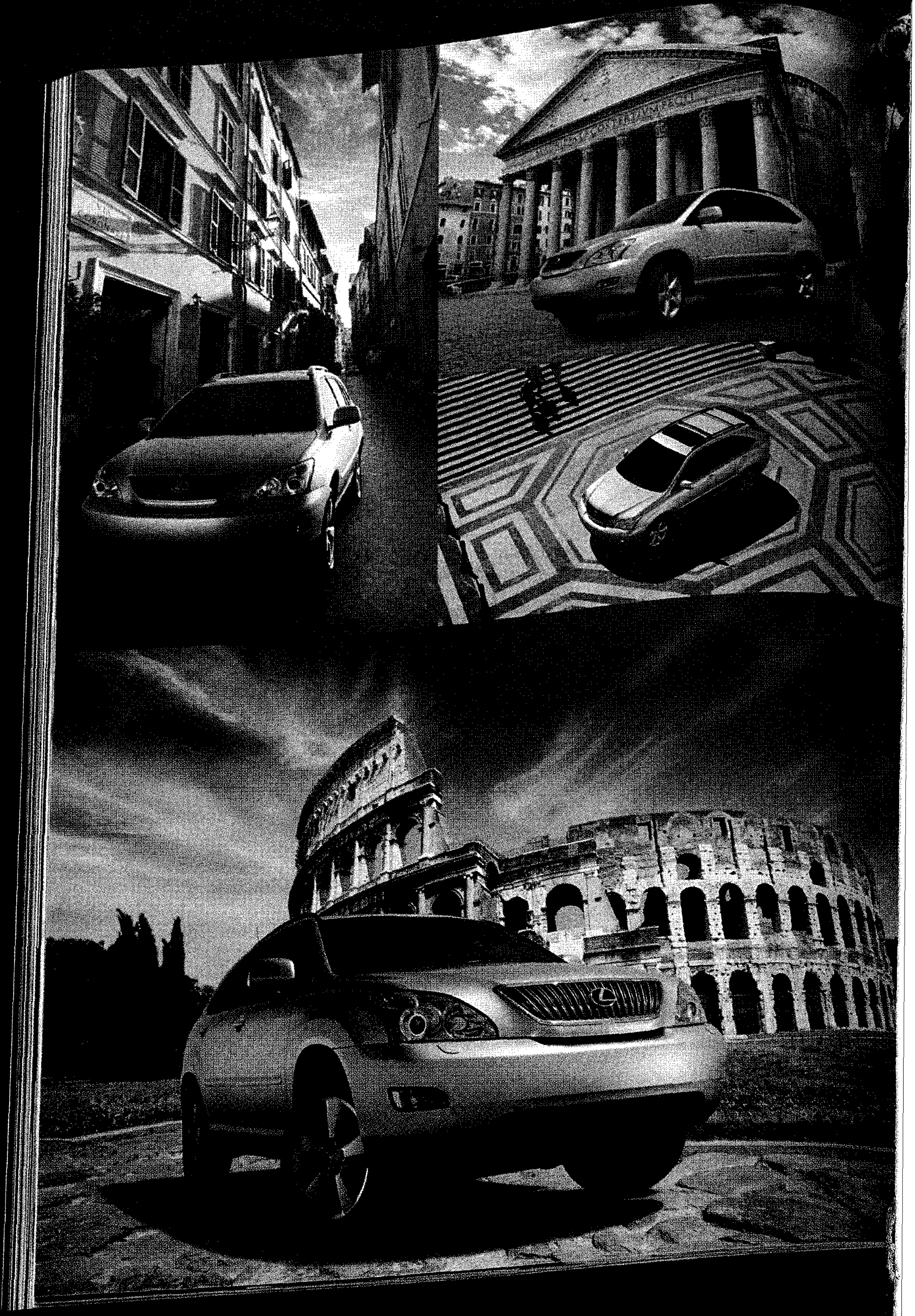

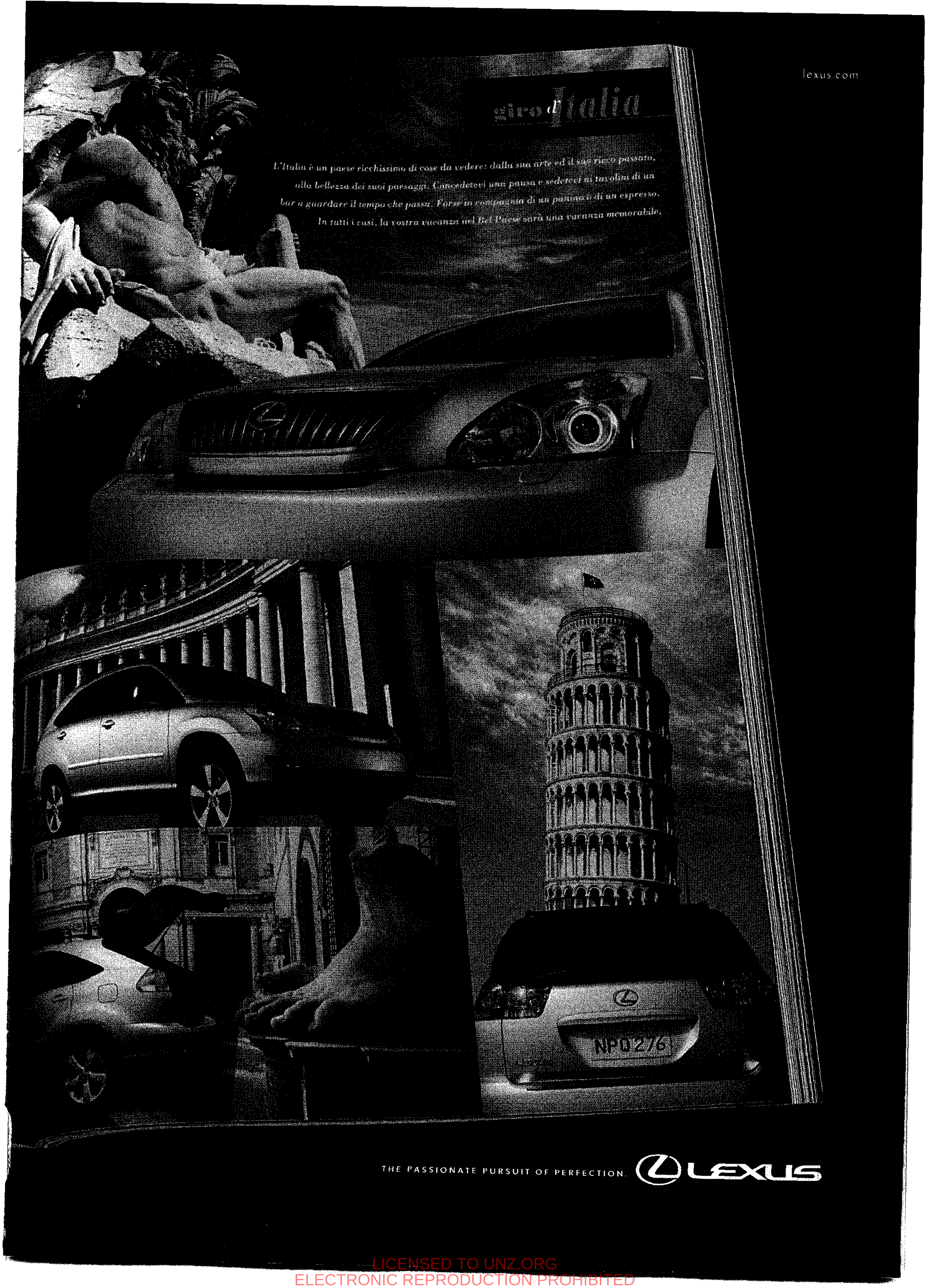

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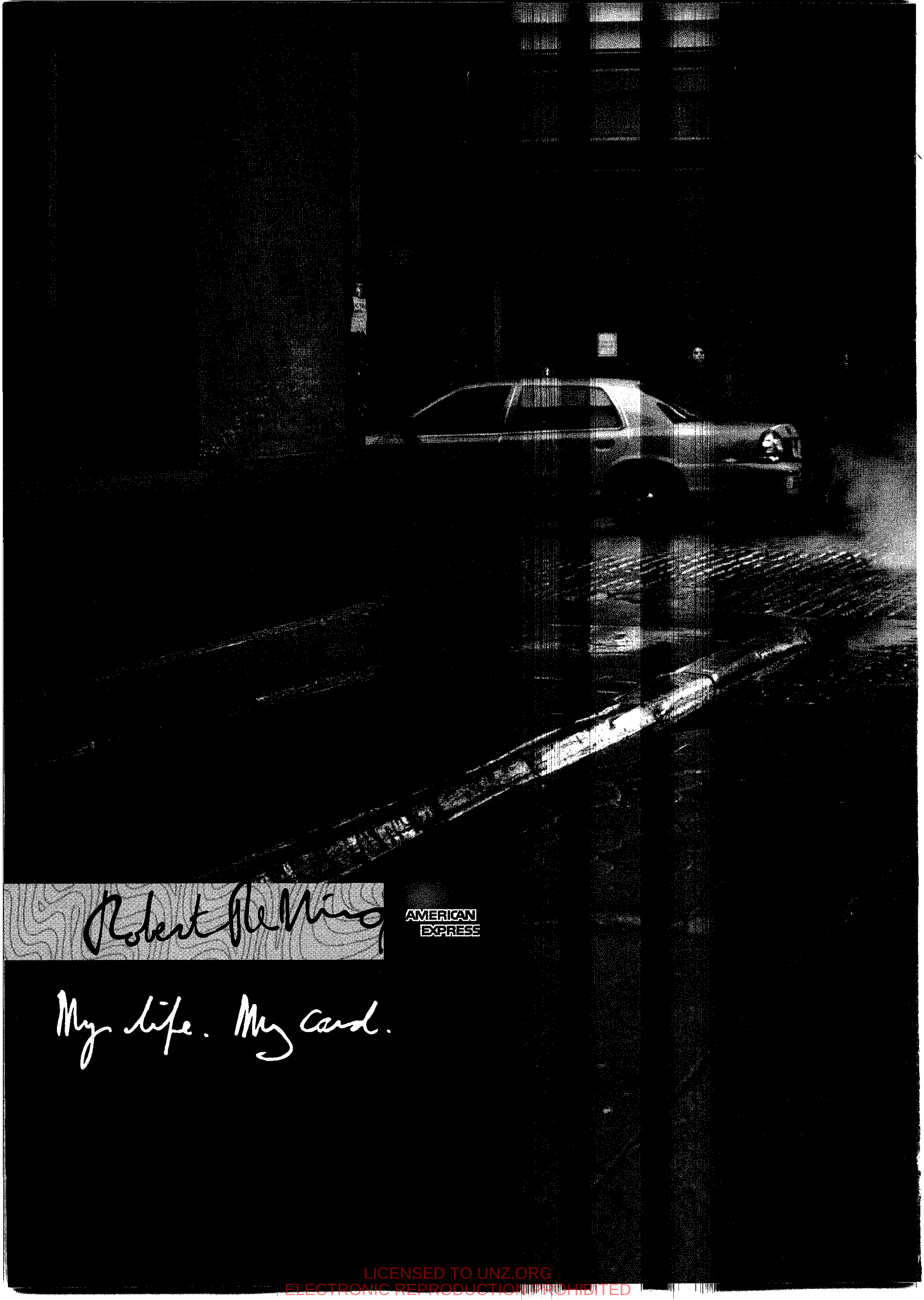
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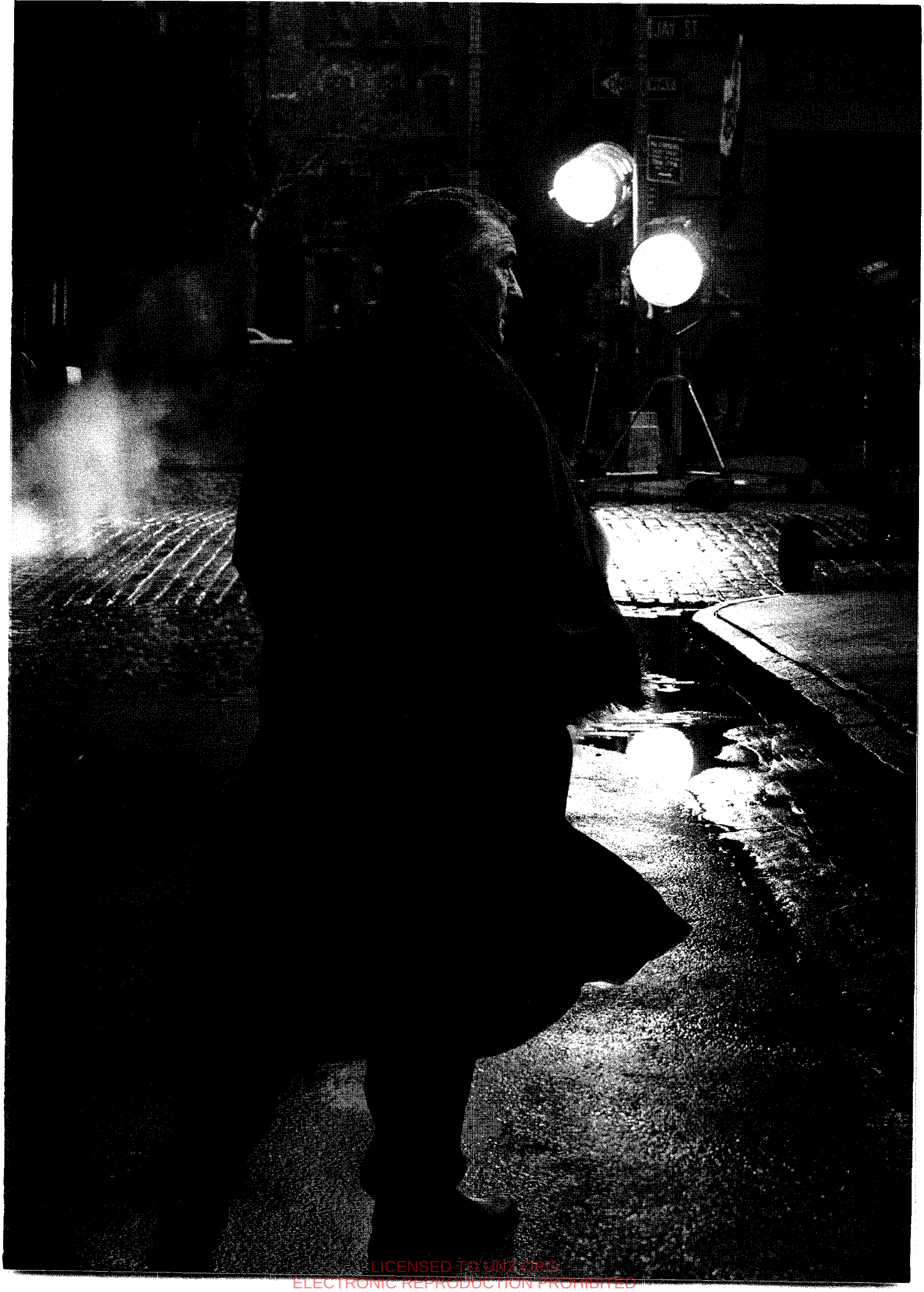

THE NEW YORKER
THE WINTER FICTION ISSUE

DECEMBER 20 & 27, 2004

12 GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN

41 THE TALK OF THE TOWN
How to change a regime; vaccine economics.

Hanna Krall 52 FICTION
"The Woman from Hamburg"

Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan 60 SHOUTS & MURMURS
The Underminer

A. M. Homes 69 PERSONAL HISTORY
The Mistress's Daughter
The parents who gave the author away.

W. G. Sebald 110 REFLECTIONS
An Attempt at Restitution
Can literature help to make up for the past?

Ian McEwan 116 FICTION
"The Diagnosis"

Chris Ware 130 SITUATION COMEDY
Dick Public

Robert Lowell 134 LIFE AND LETTERS
Dear Elizabeth
One poet writes to another.

Edward P. Jones 142 FICTION
"Adam Robinson"

THE CRITICS

Dave Eggers 166 A CRITIC AT LARGE
What's left of Monty Python?

BOOKS

175 Briefly Noted

Peter Schjeldahl 176 *A biography of Willem de Kooning.*

John Lahr 182 THE THEATRE
August Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean."

David Denby 186 THE CURRENT CINEMA
"The Aviator," "Million Dollar Baby," "Hotel Rwanda."

POEMS

Wislawa Szymborska 72 "ABC"

Charles Simic 125 "Old Soldier"

Edward Hirsch 152 "The Chardin Exhibition"

COVER *"Winter Page-Turners," by Greg Clarke* THE BACK PAGE *"And the Nominees Are," by Prudence Crowther and Edward Sorel* DRAWINGS *Drew Dernavich, Frank Cotham, Danny Shanahan, Christopher Weyant, Mike Twohy, Jack Ziegler, Alex Gregory, David Sipress, Bruce Eric Kaplan, Sam Gross, Roz Chast, Lee Lorenz, Robert Weber, Charles Barsotti, Leo Cullum, Matthew Diffee, Glen Le Lievre, Mick Stevens, Michael Crawford*

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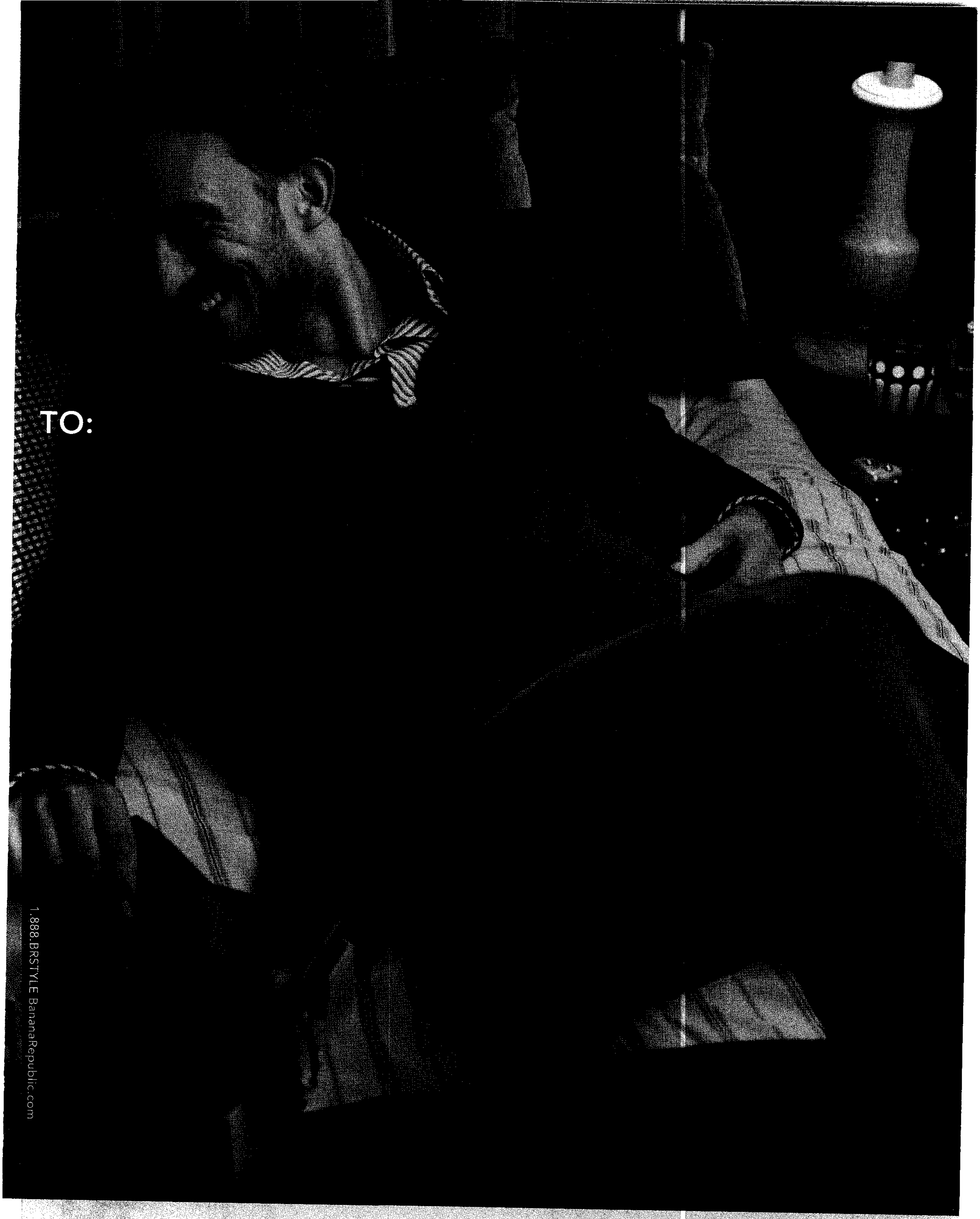
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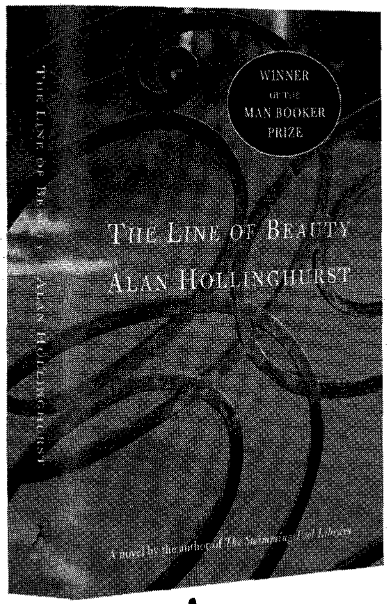

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CONTRIBUTORS

Ian McEwan ("The Diagnosis," p. 116) has published eleven novels, including "Amsterdam" and "Atonement." His new novel, "Saturday," comes out in March.

Hanna Krall ("The Woman from Hamburg," p. 52) was born in Warsaw in 1937 and worked as a reporter for *Polityka* until martial law was imposed, in 1981. Most of her books are nonfiction and deal with Polish-Jewish-German history. A collection of her stories in translation will be published in June. The stories are drawn from her interviews with Holocaust survivors.

A. M. Homes ("The Mistress's Daughter," p. 69) is the author of a number of books, including "Things You Should Know" and "Los Angeles: People, Places, and the Castle on the Hill."

W. G. Sebald ("An Attempt at Restitution," p. 110), the author of four novels, died in December, 2001. His final work, "On the Natural History of Destruction," was published last year.

Edward P. Jones ("Adam Robinson," p. 142) received this year's Pulitzer Prize for fiction for his novel "The Known World."

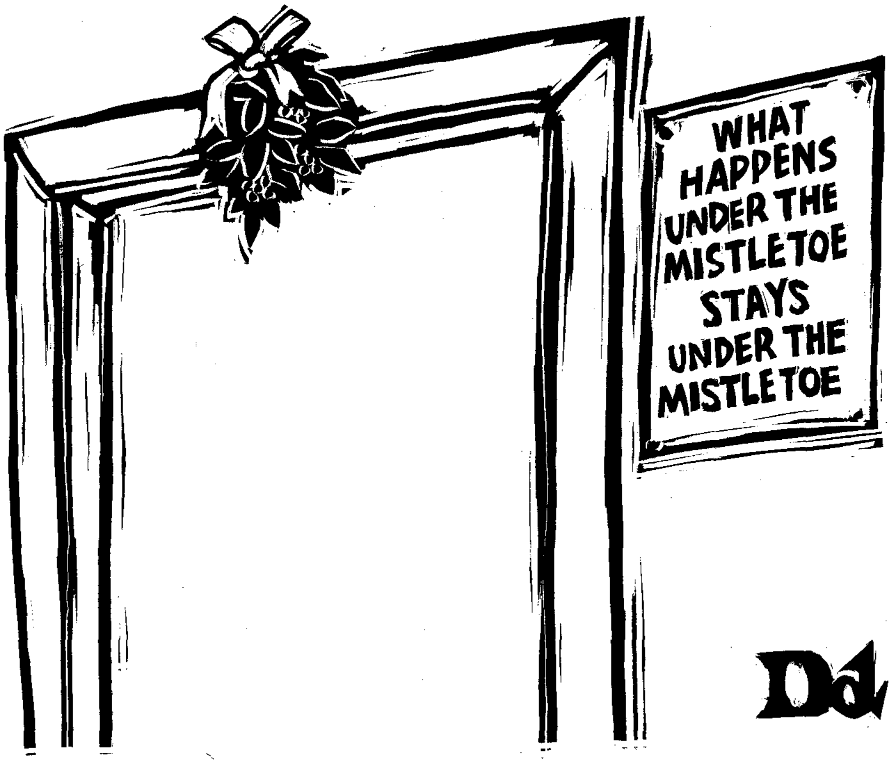
Kerry James Marshall (Painting, p. 142) has an exhibit of his work at the Studio Museum in Harlem.

Robert Lowell ("Dear Elizabeth," p. 134) was a Pulitzer Prize-winning poet. "The Letters of Robert Lowell" will be published in June.

Dave Eggers (A Critic at Large, p. 166) is the editor of *McSweeney's*. A collection of his short stories, "How We Are Hungry," came out in October.

Mike Albo and Virginia Heffernan (Shouts & Murmurs, p. 60) have a book, "The Underminer," which will be published in February.

Chris Ware (Situation Comedy, p. 130) is working on two graphic novels. A collection of his gag cartoons, "The ACME Novelty Library," will be out next spring. ♦



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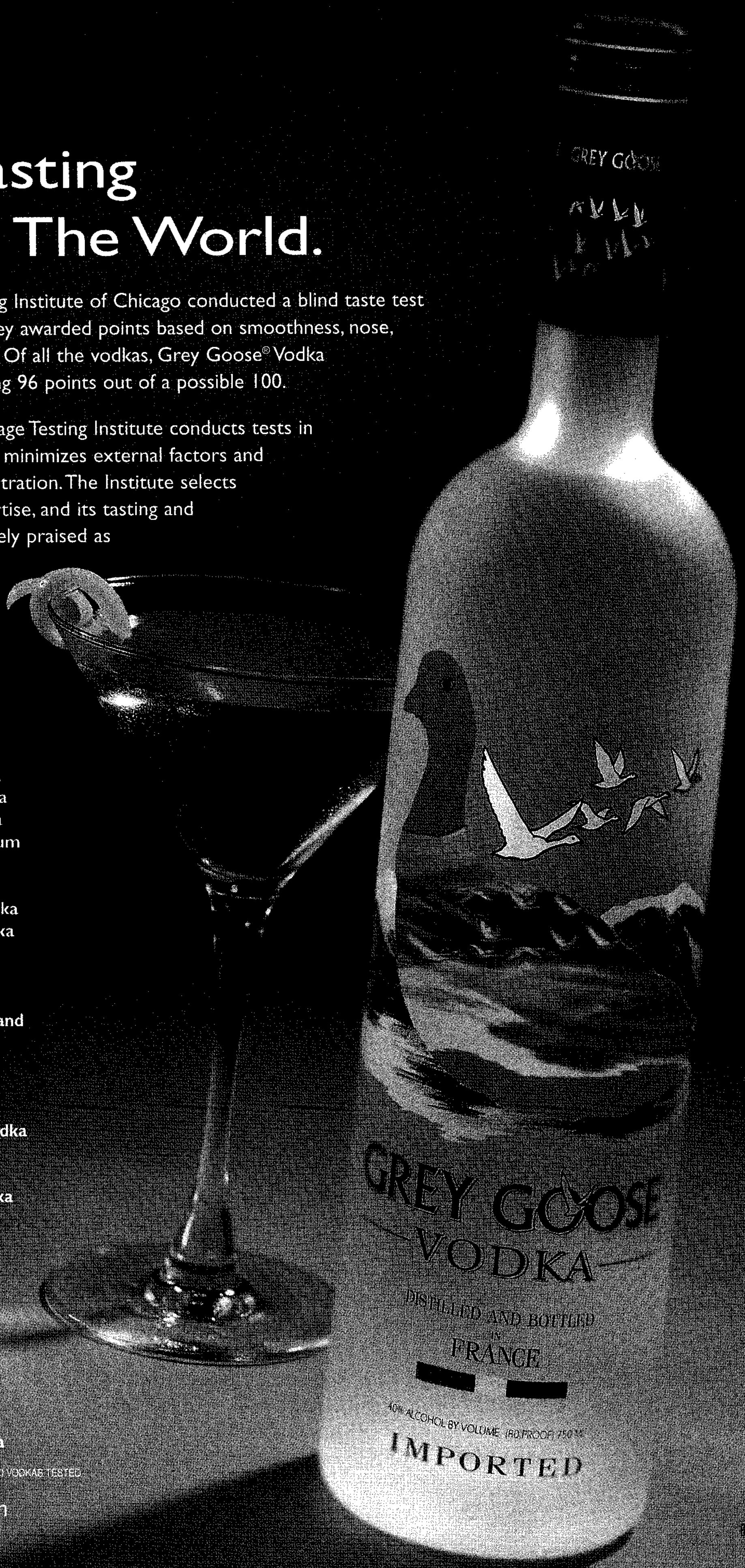
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90	Tanqueray Sterling Vodka
90	Rain 1995 Harvest Vodka
89	Ketel One Vodka
88	Wyborowa Vodka
87	Kremlyovskaya Vodka
86	Finlandia Vodka of Finland
86	Alps French Vodka
85	Skyy Vodka
82	Original Polish Vodka
82	Glenmore Special
82	Fleischmann's Royal Vodka
81	Mr. Boston Vodka
80	Pole Star Vodka
80	Luksusowa Potato Vodka
80	Absolut Vodka
78	Cardinal Vodka
78	Barton Vodka
78	Barclay's Vodka
78	Amazon Vodka
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74	Smirnoff Vodka
74	Crystal Palace Vodka
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69	Mr. Boston's Riva Vodka

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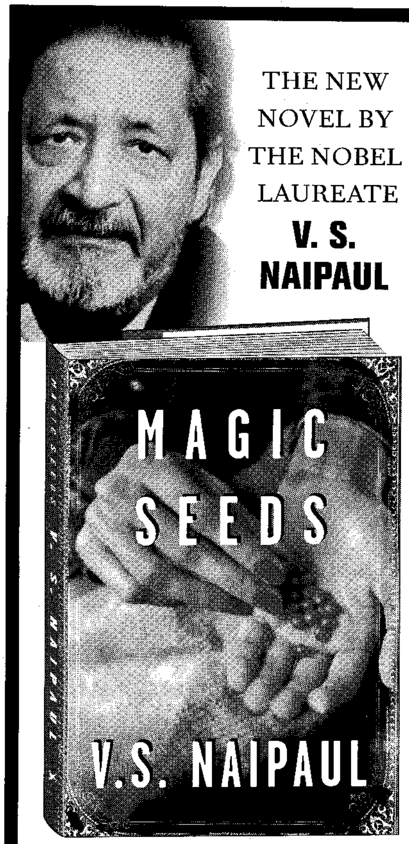

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THE MAIL

PONDERING PLAGIARISM

Malcolm Gladwell is correct that copyright enforcers should not chase after borrowed ideas and short phrases (“Something Borrowed,” November 22nd). Indeed, copyright laws generally heed the wise observation of Oliver Wendell Holmes, Sr.: “Literature is full of such coincidences, which some love to believe plagiarisms. There are thoughts always abroad in the air, which it takes more wit to avoid than to hit upon.” Nonetheless, it is important to stress that the simple courtesy of an attribution is due when one creator borrows at length from another. European countries zealously protect the author’s moral right of attribution, with little harm to creativity. The United States has never adopted a full-fledged moral right for authors, and, indeed, the Supreme Court last year ruled that a video repackager was free to strip the original credits from a film and replace them with its own, thus substantially undermining the slender prop that American law had given to the right of attribution.

Paul Goldstein
Professor of Law, Stanford Law School
Stanford, Calif.

As a novelist who has drawn material from many sources (but never, as far as I know, copied word for word), I suggest that some works signal from the beginning that the author’s purpose is to display fragments of the works of others, while others signal that they grow entirely out of the author’s experiences. Most works, perhaps, take a position somewhere in between. The author’s responsibility is to be aware of what belongs to whom, even if that means doing the tedious task of changing words around so that they have a different flavor than the ones that inspired them. Bryony Lavery’s real mistake was losing track of this and then failing to signal to her audience that she had used specific sources. I don’t think Lavery has “stolen”; rather, I think she has been careless and unprofessional. She should be able to acknowledge this failure and be allowed to correct her play to make these issues clearer in future productions.

Jane Smiley
Carmel, Calif.

In my academic work, I am studying cases of plagiarism concerning the Nobel Prize-winning author Luigi Pirandello. On several occasions, Pirandello borrowed words, phrases, or entire pages from other writers. There appears to have been a certain degree of calculation in what he did; he was careful not to copy from any very well-known colleagues. In some cases, his borrowings resemble Lavery’s: he wants his characters to be scientifically accurate, so he excerpts material from specialized texts. Critics who have noticed Pirandello’s actions—in some cases as early as forty years ago—have been reluctant to directly accuse him. Pirandello certainly reworked his appropriations in a very artistic way, but his actions seem just as unacceptable as Lavery’s.

Ombretta Frau
Assistant Professor of Italian
Mount Holyoke College
South Hadley, Mass.

Gladwell makes a persuasive case that borrowing the intellectual property of others is not as serious as we tend to think. However, plagiarism is a two-stage offense—the appropriation of ideas or words and then the representation of them as one’s own. While willfully using and building on the ideas of others may serve the continuing evolution of the collective body of knowledge and art, lying about sources serves only the self-interest of the thief and is therefore more reprehensible than the actual theft of words or ideas. Stealing may be excusable; lying about it is not.

Roger Scott
San Diego, Calif.

•

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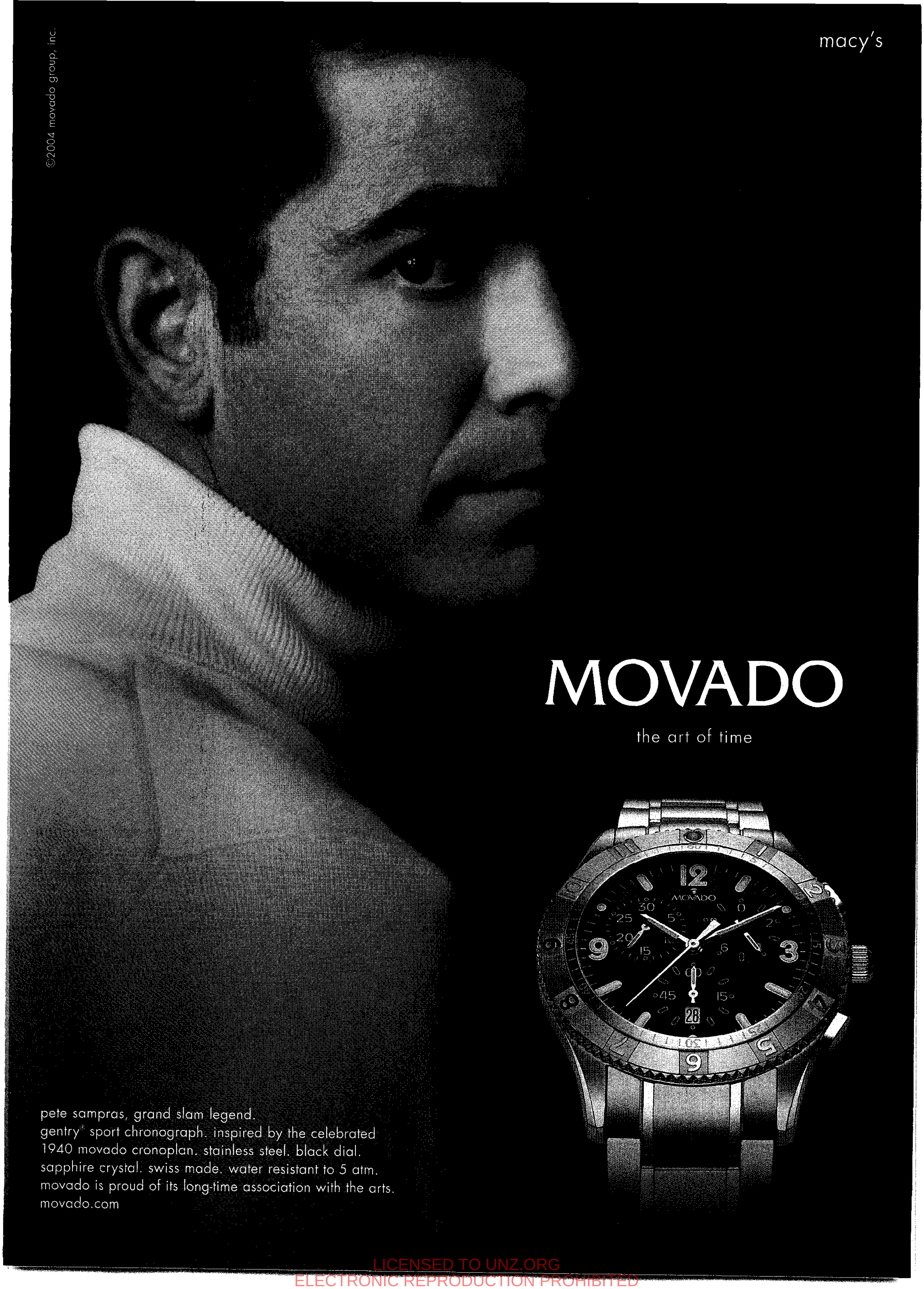

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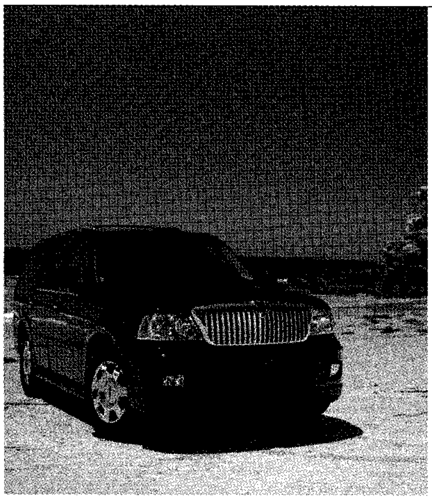

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A self-dubbed "audio nut," Taylor installed THX® Certified Audio in his home theater. Another detail also available in the Navigator.

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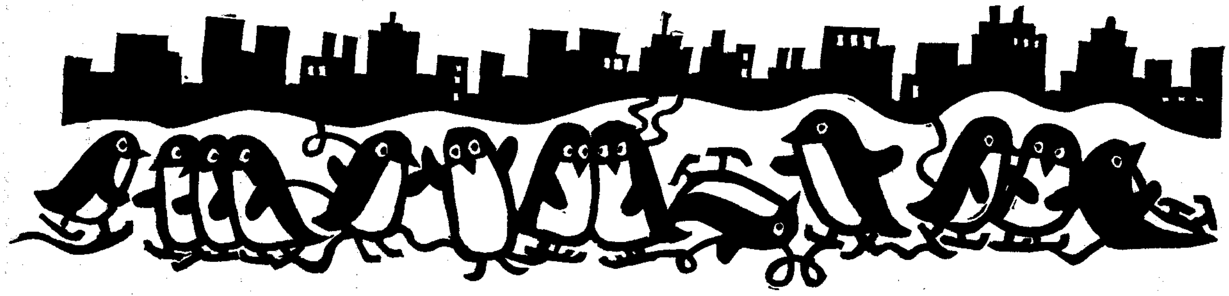
GOINGS ON ABOUT TOWN



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For expanded events listings, please visit www.newyorker.com/goingson.

THIS WEEK

MALE CALL

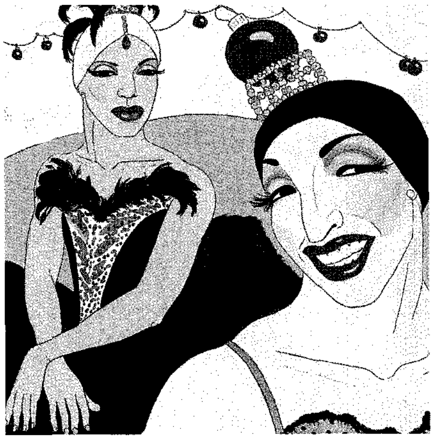
The all-male troupe Les Ballets Trockadero de Monte Carlo returns to the Joyce for a two-week thirtieth-anniversary season. Much more than a bunch of guys in tutus and toe shoes, Olga Supphozhova (Robert Carter), Igor Slowpokin (Manolo Molina), and the rest of the company perform farcical ballet sendups that are also tributes. The first program features "Les Sylphides," "Go for Barocco," "Dying Swan," and the underwater scene from "The Humpback Horse"; the second includes "Swan Lake (Act II)" and the Pina Bausch parody "I wanted to dance with you at the Café of Experience." (Dec. 21-Jan. 2; see Dance.)

IBERIAN WOMAN

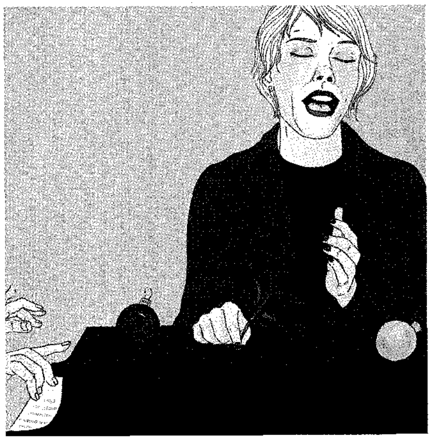
Paz Vega is the Julia Roberts of Spain, minus the twins and often minus clothing—she played the title character in "Sex and Lucia" and also appeared nude in Pedro Almodóvar's "Talk to Her." This week, she makes her Hollywood début in James L. Brooks's "Spanglish," playing a Mexican maid who catches the eye of celebrity chef Adam Sandler. The film is Brooks's first since "As Good As It Gets," which won multiple Oscars in 1997. (Opens Dec. 17; see Movies.)

SWEDISH HOLIDAYS

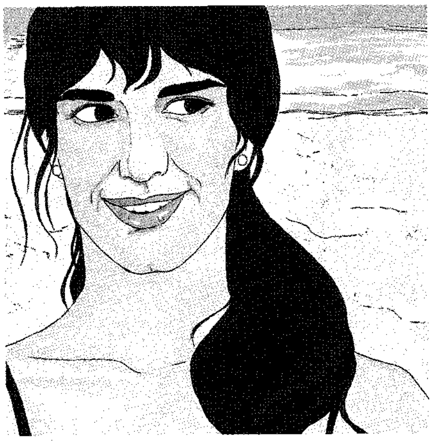
After two decades of memorable singing, the Swedish mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter—whose voice is still in its gently lustrous prime—is beginning to undertake the kinds of projects that mark that indefinable passage into earth-mother status. Von Otter will be singing Mélisande at the Met in January, but first she'll lend her warm yet aristocratic style to "Home for the Holidays," a concert with her regular accompanist, Bengt Forsberg, and an ensemble of folk musicians that mixes music by Bach, Percy Grainger, and Hugh Martin ("Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas") with a generous selection of Scandinavian folk songs. (Alice Tully Hall, Dec. 18; see Classical Music.)



Les Ballets Trockadero, in a thirtieth-anniversary celebration at the Joyce.



The Swedish mezzo-soprano Anne Sofie von Otter presents a holiday program.



LARA TOMLIN

The Spanish actress Paz Vega stars in James L. Brooks's new film, "Spanglish."

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THE THEATRE

OPENINGS AND PREVIEWS

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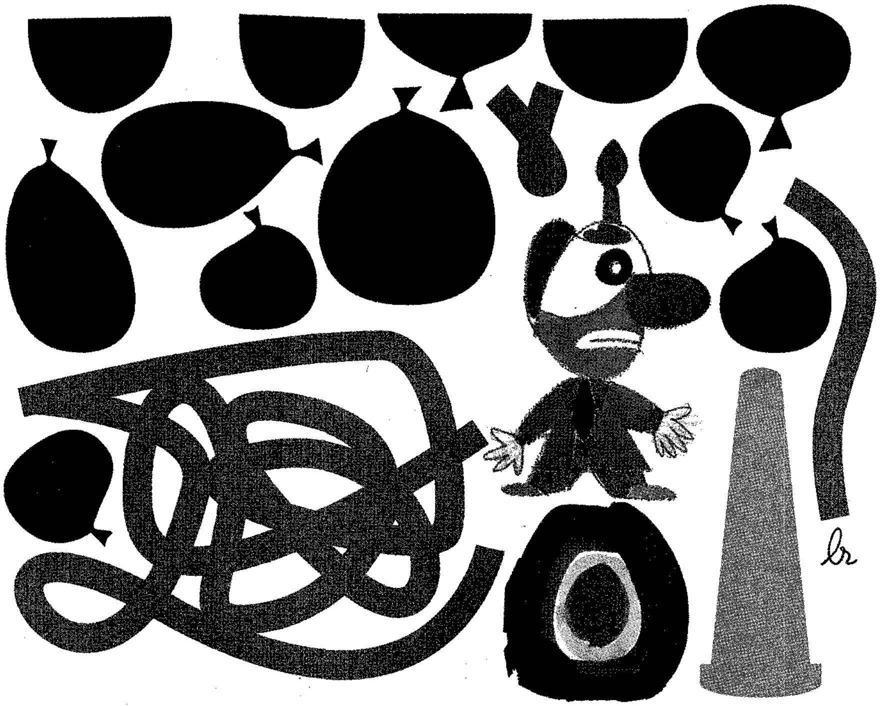
AFTER THE BALL
The American première of a musical confection by Noël Coward, based on Oscar Wilde's "Lady Windermere's Fan." Directed by Tony Walton. In previews. Opens Dec. 16 at 7. (Irish Repertory Theatre, 132 W. 22nd St. 212-727-2737.)



"Aga-Boom," an interactive clown show with many props, at the New Victory.

LAURIE ROSENWALD

FAT PIG
A man tries to muster the courage to date an overweight woman, in a new play by Neil LaBute that stars Jeremy Piven, Ashlie Atkinson, Keri Russell, and Andrew McCarthy. Directed by Jo Bonney. In previews. Opens Dec. 15 at 7. (Lucille Lortel, 121 Christopher St. 212-279-4200.)

GOOD VIBRATIONS
In the tradition of "Mamma Mia!," this musical, about East Coast teen-agers who head west in search of surf and sun, is set to more than thirty songs by Brian Wilson and the Beach Boys. Directed and choreographed by John Carrafa. Previews begin Dec. 20. (Eugene O'Neill, 230 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.)

LITTLE WOMEN
Sutton Foster ("Thoroughly Modern Millie") is Jo and Maureen McGovern is Marmee, in a new musical inspired by Louisa May Alcott's novel about four American sisters of the Civil War era. Book by Alan Knee, lyrics by Mindi Dickstein, and music by Jason Howland. Directed by Susan Schulman and choreographed by Michael Lichtefeld. In previews. (Virginia, 245 W. 52nd St. 212-239-6200.)

THE RIVALS
Mark Lamos directs a revival of Richard Brinsley Sheridan's comedy of manners, starring Brian Murray, Emily Bergl, Richard Easton, Matt Letscher, and, as Mrs. Malaprop, Dana Ivey. In previews. Opens Dec. 16 at 7:30. (Vivian Beaumont, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200.)

OPENED RECENTLY

AGA-BOOM
A punch-away paper wall, beach balls, and empty detergent bottles are among the props used by the clowns in this interactive spectacle, which takes its name from *bumaga*, the Russian word for paper. Directed by the Cirque du Soleil veteran Dimitri Bogatirev. (New Victory, 209 W. 42nd St. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 16.)

THE BALTIMORE WALTZ
In Paula Vogel's Obie-winning 1992 play, a man takes his sister to Europe after she contracts a disease that strikes unmarried female grade-school teachers. The show is quirky (one actor plays Harry Lyme, from "The Third Man," a quack Austrian physician, and other characters), and ultimately quite moving. In reality, it was Vogel's brother, Carl, who got a disease—AIDS—and died of it, and this play is her topsy-turvy tribute. Kristen Johnston, well cast as the sister, projects her riveting masculine-feminine charisma; David Marshall Grant plays the brother; and Jeremy Webb deftly delivers the character roles. (Peter Norton Space, 555 W. 42nd St. 212-244-7529. Through Jan. 9.)

BELLE ÉPOQUE
Martha Clarke and Charles L. Mee's music-and-dance exploration of Toulouse-Lautrec (Mark Povinelli) at the Moulin Rouge is a study of the erotic grotesque, in a Weillian mood. The production is darkly imagined; dancers in louche attire (notably, Tomé Cousin, as Chocolat, and the gorgeous Gabrielle Malone, as Marie) wheel across the stage as a marvellous onstage ensemble plays period-appropriate music on violin, cello, French horn, tuba, bandoneon, and piano. The most memorable feature of the production is a bawdy, prating prose poem that La Goulue (Ruth Maleczech, dressed in wide, blowsy tiers of ruffles) recites about her . . . cat. (Mitzi E. Newhouse, Lincoln Center. 212-239-6200. Through Jan. 9.)

LA CAGE AUX FOLLES
A revival of Jerry Herman and Harvey Fierstein's musical about a gay couple who disguise themselves as husband and wife. Gary Beach and Daniel Davis lead the cast. Directed by Jerry Zaks. (Marquis, Broadway at 46th St. 212-307-4100.)

DEMOCRACY
A strong production of Michael Frayn's play about the popular German Chancellor Willy Brandt (James Naughton) and the East German mole Günter Guillaume (Richard Thomas), who served him and eventually sank him. Directed by Michael Blakemore. (Brooks Atkinson, 256 W. 47th St. 212-307-4100.)

DOUBT
A compelling melodrama about possible sexual abuse in a Catholic school that pits a battle-axe mother superior against a popular priest. John Patrick Shanley's well-told tale is a meditation on the dangers and importance of skepticism. The cast is superb—the rebarbative Cherry Jones dukes it out with a charismatic Brían F. O'Byrne while Heather Goldenhersh tempers the simmering cauldron of ill will with her fetching sweetness. (12/13/04) (Manhattan Theatre Club at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212.)

THE FOREIGNER
Larry Shue's chestnut about a shy Brit named Charlie who spends three days in a hillbilly hideaway is given delirious life by the physical clowning of Matthew Broderick (as Charlie), by Byron Jennings, as his chum "Froggy" LeSueur (in knee-socks and khaki shorts), and especially by Kevin Cahoon, as a half-wit named Ellard, whose goggle-eyed loopiness gives Don Knotts a run for his money. Directed by Scott Schwartz. (Roundabout at Laura Pels, 111 W. 46th St. 212-719-1300.)

FRANKENSTEIN
Mary Shelley's horror story is adapted by the Flying Machine, in a multimedia production directed by Joshua Carlbach. (SoHo Rep, 46 Walker St. 212-868-7444.)

GEM OF THE OCEAN
Phylicia Rashad stars in the New York première of the ninth play in August Wilson's ten-play chronicle of the African-American experience. Directed by Kenny Leon. (Reviewed in this issue.) (Walter Kerr, 219 W. 48th St. 212-239-6200.)

THE HASTY HEART
The Keen Company presents John Patrick's serio-comic drama about soldiers in a British Army hospital in Southeast Asia during the Second World War. Directed by Jonathan Silverstein. (Theatre Three, 311 W. 43rd St. 212-868-4444.)

THE HIGHWAYMAN
The young playwright Julia Jarcho directs her new play, inspired by the famous Alfred Noyes poem—about Bess the landlord's daughter and the highwayman who comes riding up to the inn, across the ghostly moor. (The Stable, 16 Main St., Dumbo, Brooklyn. For more information, call 212-330-9042. Through Dec. 19.)

ISABELLA'S ROOM
BAM's Next Wave Festival closes the season with a multimedia work by Belgium's Needcompany, which recaps the events of the last century, filtered through the imagination of a ninety-year-old blind Parisienne. Performed in English and French with English surtitles. (BAM's Harvey Theatre, 651 Fulton St. 718-636-4100. Through Dec. 18.)

MODERN ORTHODOX
Jason Biggs, Molly Ringwald, Craig Bierko, and Jenn Harris star in a new comedy by Daniel Goldfarb about faith, love, and the diamond district. Directed by James Lapine. (Dodger Stages, 340 W. 50th St. 212-239-6200.)

NEWSICAL
Strictly speaking, there's little news in "Newsical," a tuneful and energetic cabaret act that draws more of its headline material from tabloid TV than from "All Things Considered." Rick Crom's catchy melodies and sardonic lyrics have a fairly high corn quotient, but the high-speed performers (directed by Donna Drake, with a knack for screwball timing) deliver the stories with verve, and have fun channelling Liza, Martha, Michael Jackson, and Dr. Phil as they go. (Upstairs at Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-307-4100.)

9 PARTS OF DESIRE
Heather Raffo's remarkable one-woman show, which bears witness to Iraqi women's political oppression, is an example of how art can remake the world and eloquently name pain. Based on research and dozens of interviews conducted on four continents over eleven years (Raffo portrays nine women in the course of the evening), the play brings news of the psychic life of the brutalized and allows us to think about the unthinkable. Directed by Joanna Settle. (11/8/04) (Manhattan Ensemble Theatre, 55 Mercer St. 212-239-6200.)

A NUMBER
Sam Shepard, seated at one end of a leather couch, undergoes a series of awkward confrontations with a number of his cloned offspring (all played with haunting credibility and both subtle and unsubtle dif-

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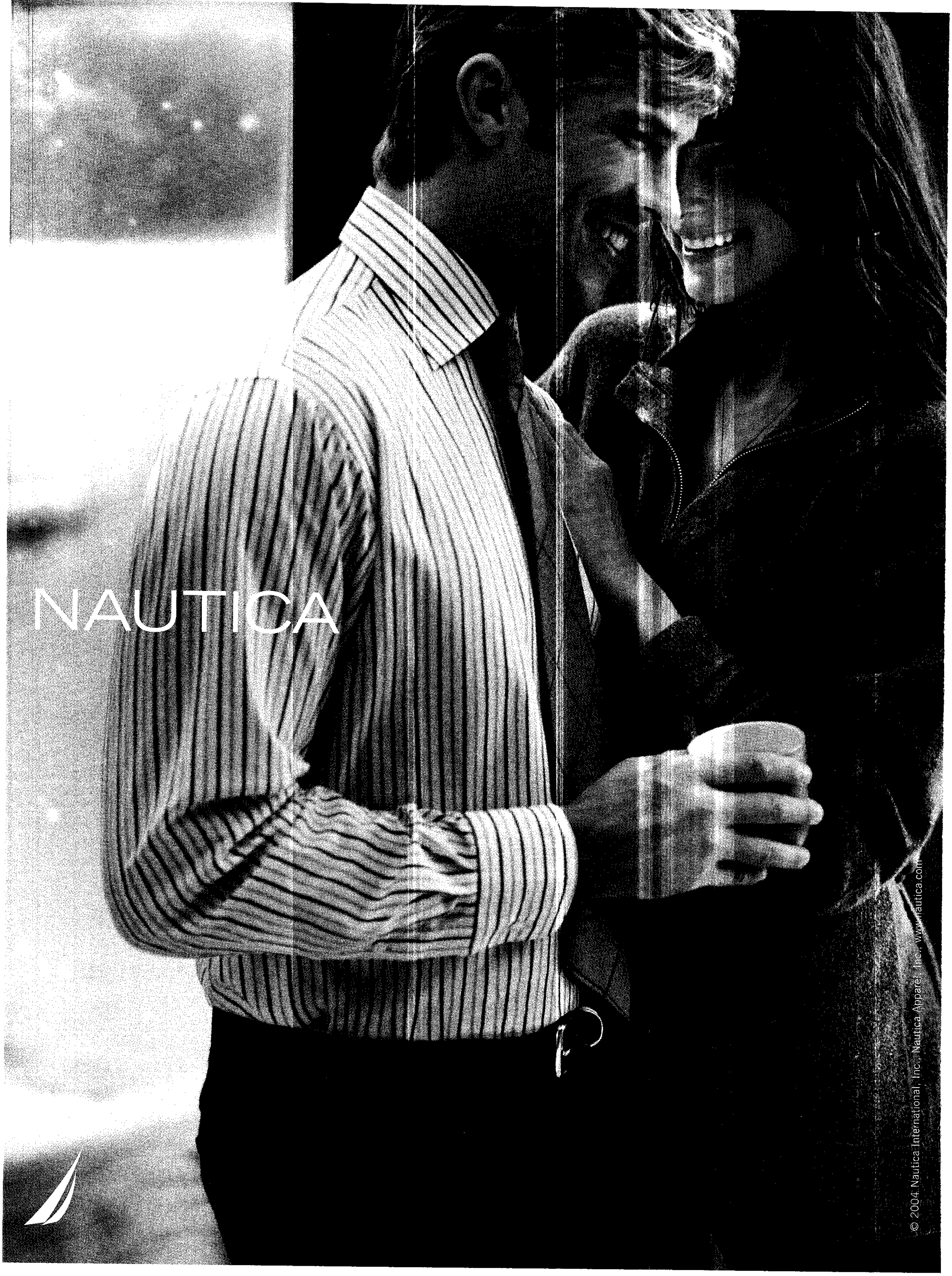

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ferences by Dallas Roberts). The production's appeal has more to do with the gravitational pull of Shepard's charisma and the nuanced neediness Roberts projects (in each incarnation) than with Caryl Churchill's writing, which feels both spare and repetitive—less like a play than a series of variations on one thesis. (New York Theatre Workshop, 79 E. 4th St. 212-239-6200.)

PACIFIC OVERTURES
Stephen Sondheim and Hal Prince's musical from 1976, which told the story of Commodore Perry's gunboat diplomacy with Japan, tried to muscle the insular American musical away from its populist roots to their esoteric way of doing business. The challenge, according to Prince, was to "tell the story as though it were written by a Japanese playwright in the Kabuki style, with the Americans the traditional Kabuki villains." In this new kind of musical, concept replaced character, gravity replaced frivolity, irony replaced affirmation. In the Roundabout Theatre revival at Studio 54, Amon Miyamoto's direction is elegant; he uses Junko Koshino's subtle costumes to make minimal but powerful stage pictures. The production's sense of visual and emotional reserve brings with it a certain aridity: one longs for a touch of American vulgarity. (12/13/04) (Studio 54, at 254 W. 54th St. 212-719-1300.)

RODNEY'S WIFE
In an overheated new drama by Richard Nelson (who also directs), David Strathairn plays Rodney, an American actor who is holed up in a villa in Rome, filming a spaghetti Western. Members of his entourage—his sister (Maryann Plunkett), his second wife, Fay (Haviland Morris), and a grown daughter (Jessica Chastain)—hover about the villa in his shadow, as ornamental and fragile as bone china. During a night of booze-fuelled erotic revelation, all show their cracks, which Rodney is helpless to mend. (Playwrights Horizons, 416 W. 42nd St. 212-279-4200.)

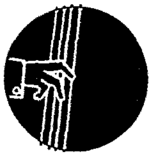
A SECOND HAND MEMORY
Woody Allen's powerful tale of the deferred dreams of a Jewish Brooklyn family in the nineteen-fifties, which Allen also directs, takes its title from the cobbled recollections of the romantic, peripatetic narrator, Alma Wolfe (Elizabeth Marvel), who has been banished from the family and travels the world in search of love and experience. But most of the characters, notably Lou (Dominic Chianese) and Diane (the fetching Erica Leerhsen), struggle under the weight of other people's desires—obligations that turn out to be secondhand. (12/6/04) (Atlantic, 336 W. 20th St. 212-239-6200.)

700 SUNDAYS
Billy Crystal's Broadway début, an affectionate memoir of his boyhood on Long Island, centers on his father, who managed a jazz record shop and died of a heart attack when Crystal was fifteen. The show is a kind of "It's a Wonderful Yiddishe Life"—tender and funny, it brings together physical comedy, home movies, and nostalgic music. Written by Crystal, with additional material by Alan Zweibel. Directed by Des McAnuff. (Broadhurst, 235 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.)

SOUVENIR
A new play by Stephen Temperley, about the eccentric socialite Florence Foster Jenkins, who gave terrible recitals at the Ritz-Carlton Hotel and Carnegie Hall in the nineteen-forties. Judy Kaye plays the benighted songstress. Directed by Vivian Matalon and conducted by Jack Lee. (York Theatre at St. Peter's Church, Lexington Ave. at 54th St. 212-868-4444.)

THE TALK OF THE TOWN
The Peccadillo Theatre Company sets the members of the Algonquin Round Table singing and dancing in a musical—which isn't nearly as embarrassing as you might expect. The plot (it includes the founding of this magazine) is perfunctory and the mood too sunny to be accurate (there's a kick line). But Ginny Redington and Tom Dawes's well-crafted period-style songs are genuinely clever, and the classic quips, briskly deployed throughout, still crackle. Directed by Dan Wackerman. (Bank Street Theatre, 155 Bank St. 212-868-4444. Through Dec. 19.)

JAZZ NOTES



WAYNE'S WORLD
"Footprints: The Life and Music of Wayne Shorter" (Sony), a two-CD retrospective tracing the five-decade career of the great saxophonist and composer, throws light on why he was dubbed "Mr. Weird" during his adolescence. The routes that this colossus of modern jazz has taken over the years can only be accounted for by personal eccentricity—Wayne, it seems, is as weird as he wants to be.

Shorter first gained attention during the sixties in the bands of Art Blakey and Miles Davis and from a series of brilliant solo albums released by Blue Note Records. The first disk of "Footprints" touches lightly on highlights from these acoustic years, though a multi-disk set could easily be drawn just from this glorious era. Such tracks as "Lester Left Town," "Speak No Evil," "Nefertiti," and the gorgeous ballad "Infant Eyes" display Shorter's gift for enchanting melody and a powerful, strangely misterioso tenor-saxophone style. These recordings were not only classics in their day; twenty years later, during the jazz resurgence of the eighties, they became a touchstone for a generation of younger players and composers.

By the turn of the seventies, though, Shorter had gone electric with the band Weather Report. He embraced fusion and developed a disturbing predilection for burying himself in thick, overly slick production. For all their superficial excitement, Weather Report tracks like "Palladium" and such solo-album songs as "Children of the Night" and "Joy Ryder" have a bloated and dated feel.

Shorter must have felt that something was amiss as well. By 1997, he returned to making acoustic recordings. The final performances on "Footprints" are blissfully unplugged, although there's nothing from last year's triumphant studio recording, "Alegría." Still, there's plenty of proof of Shorter's unsurpassed talent: his swaggering guest spot with J. J. Johnson on "In Walked Wayne," the quietly assertive force that he cooks up with Herbie Hancock on "Aung San Suu Kyi," and the feisty interplay he has with his quartet on "Masquelero." He sounds as if he were glad to be home again.

—Steve Futterman

ALSO PLAYING

AVENUE Q
Golden, 252 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
BEAUTY AND THE BEAST
Lunt-Fontanne, 205 W. 46th St. 212-307-4747.
BOMBAY DREAMS
Broadway Theatre, Broadway at 53rd St. 212-239-6200.
BROOKLYN: THE MUSICAL
Plymouth, 236 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
BUG
Barrow Street Theatre, 27 Barrow St., at Seventh Ave. 212-239-6200.
CHICAGO
Ambassador, 215 W. 49th St. 212-239-6200.
DAME EDNA: BACK WITH A VENGEANCE!
Music Box, 239 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
DAVE GORMAN'S GOOGLEWHACK! ADVENTURE
Village Theatre, 158 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100.
FIDDLER ON THE ROOF
Minskoff, 200 W. 45th St. 212-307-4100.
FIVE BY TENN
Manhattan Theatre Club, at City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. (Closes Dec. 19.)
42ND STREET
Ford Center, 213 W. 42nd St. 212-307-4100. (Closes Jan. 2.)
GOLDA'S BALCONY
Helen Hayes, 240 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200. (Closes Jan. 2.)
THE GOOD BODY
Booth, 222 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
GUANTÁNAMO
45 Bleecker Theatre, at 45 Bleecker St. 212-307-4100. (Closes Dec. 19.)
HAIRSPRAY
Neil Simon, 250 W. 52nd St. 212-307-4100.
JEWTOPIA
Westside, 407 W. 43rd St. 212-239-6200.
MAMMA MIA!
Winter Garden, Broadway at 50th St. 212-563-5544.
MOVIN' OUT
Richard Rodgers, 226 W. 46th St. 212-307-4100.
'NIGHT, MOTHER
Royale, 242 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
THE PRODUCERS
St. James, 246 W. 44th St. 212-239-6200.
RECKLESS
Biltmore, 261 W. 47th St. 212-239-6200.
SLAVA'S SNOWSHOW
Union Square Theatre, 100 E. 17th St. 212-505-0700.
TRYING
Promenade, Broadway at 76th St. 212-239-6200.
TWELVE ANGRY MEN
American Airlines Theatre, 227 W. 42nd St. 212-719-1300.
WHOOPI
Lyceum, 149 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.
WICKED
Gershwin, 222 W. 51st St. 212-307-4100.
WONDERFUL TOWN
Al Hirschfeld, 302 W. 45th St. 212-239-6200.

DANCE

NEW YORK CITY BALLET
In Balanchine's "Nutcracker" (now celebrating its fiftieth anniversary), the Christmas party is gemütlich, the nightmare scary, the tree tall, and Candyland just what it should be: a child's dream of heaven. Tchaikovsky wrote the music at the peak of his powers as a fabulist, and Balanchine's imagination rose to meet it. (New York State Theatre, Lincoln Center. 212-870-5570. Dec. 14-16, Dec. 21, and Dec. 28 at 6; Dec. 17 at 8; Dec. 18 at 2 and 8, Dec. 19 and Dec. 26 at 1 and 5; and Dec. 20, Dec. 22-23, and Dec. 27 at 2 and 6. Through Jan. 2.)

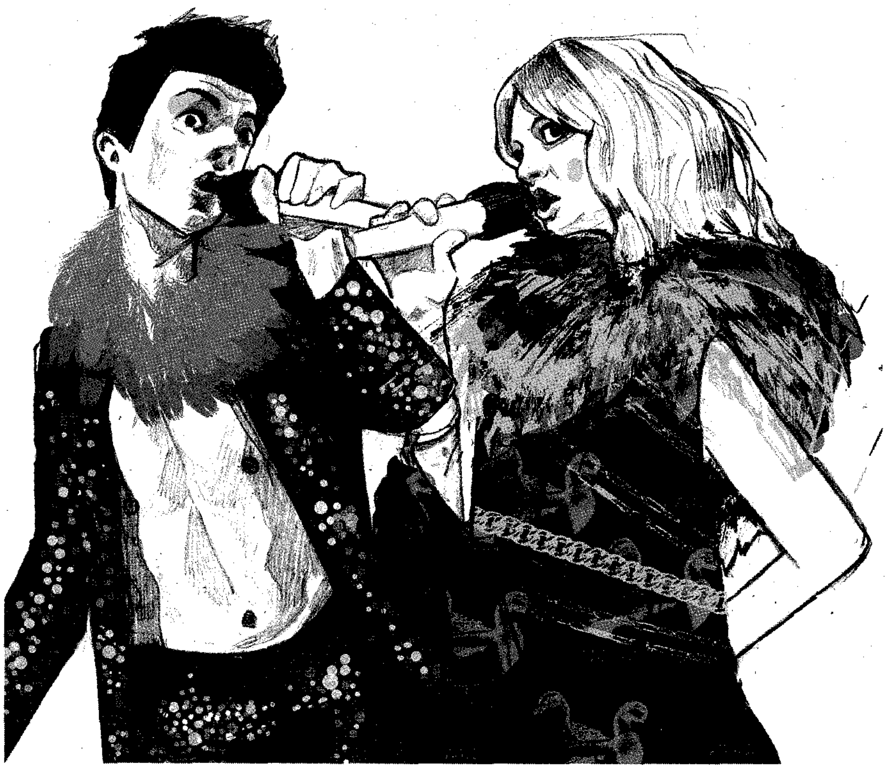
ALVIN AILEY AMERICAN DANCE THEATRE
The company's five-week season at City Center continues. ♦ Dec. 14 at 7: "Love Stories," "Rainbow Round My Shoulder," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 15 at 8: "Heart Song," "Caught," "Vespers," and "The Winter in Lisbon." ♦ Dec. 16 at 8, Dec. 22 at 2, Dec. 26 at 3, and Dec. 28 at 7: "Ailey Classics." ♦ Dec. 17 at 8 and Dec. 19 at 7:30: "Episodes," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 18 at 2: "Night Creature," "Caught," "Vespers," and "The Winter in Lisbon." ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: "Night Creature," "Cry," "Rainbow Round My Shoulder," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 19 at 3: "Following the Subtle Current Upstream," "Episodes," and "Grace." ♦ Dec. 21 at 7: "Grace," "Episodes," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 22 at 8: "Love Stories," "Burlesque," and "Shining Star." ♦ Dec. 23 at 8: "Night Creature," "Cry," "Hidden Rites," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 24 at 8: "Shining Star," "Love Stories," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 25 at 8: "Love Stories," "Caught," "Vespers," and "Revelations." ♦ Dec. 26 at 7:30: "Vespers," "Caught," "Rainbow Round My Shoulder," and "The Winter in Lisbon." (City Center, 131 W. 55th St. 212-581-1212. Through Jan. 2.)

MERCE CUNNINGHAM DANCE COMPANY
Stitched together from sections of a repertory that's decades deep, a Cunningham "Event" is a long bolt of lucid, often virtuosic movement, endlessly varied yet all of a piece. Per tradition, the dancing isn't combined with the music until performance, and each evening features a different décor and a different assortment of improvising musicians. The designers include Jacqueline Matisse Monnier, Robert Gober,

Maya Ciarrocchi, Gabriel Orozco, Christian Marclay, and Barbara Robertson. The musicians include John King, George Lewis, Marina Rosenfeld, and Ikue Mori. (Joyce Theatre, 175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 14 at 7:30, Dec. 15-17 at 8, Dec. 18 at 2 and 8, and Dec. 19 at 2 and 7:30.)

LES BALLETS TROCKADERO DE MONTE CARLO
The all-male troupe brings its hilarious ballet satires to the Joyce (see This Week). (175 Eighth Ave., at 19th St. 212-242-0800. Dec. 21, Dec. 23, and Dec. 27-28 at 8; Dec. 22 at 3 and 8; Dec. 24 at 5; and Dec. 26 at 3 and 7:30. Through Jan. 2.)

"NUT/CRACKED"
David Parker and his Bang Group lead a twenty-one-member cast in a vaudeville-flavored reimagining of "The Nutcracker." Parker's vision is original and whimsical: the Russian trepak becomes a warp-speed disco number; a man (Parker) traverses the stage on point, on enormous pink toe shoes, slurping noodles out of a Chinese take-out box; a woman does a fan dance to a Duke Ellington riff on "Dance of the Sugar Plum Fairy"; another woman tap-dances on bubble wrap to Glenn Miller's version of "Waltz of the Flowers." Parker fearlessly juxtaposes styles: a jitterbug sequence turns into a march step, jazz hands segue into ballet turns. (Dance Theatre Workshop, 219 W. 19th St. 212-924-0077. Dec. 15-17 at 7:30 and Dec. 18-19 at 2 and 7:30. Through Dec. 22.)



Jake Shears and Ana Matronic, of the Scissor Sisters, at the Hammerstein Ballroom.

RACHEL DOMM

LIONEL POPKIN AND ANDY RUSS
Popkin, a former Trisha Brown dancer, and Russ, a choreographer and composer, present an evening of collaborations, part of Danspace's "Shares" series. "And Then We Eat," choreographed by Popkin, who performs with Carolyn Hall, and set to an original score by Russ, is a staged interpretation of the preparation of one of Popkin's favorite childhood recipes. "9 Spaces for 5 People," choreographed by Russ, is made up of variations on one looping phrase—in music and dance. (St. Mark's In-the-Bowery, Second Ave. at 10th St. 212-674-8194. Dec. 17-18 at 8:30 and Dec. 19 at 7:30.)

"DANCE IN PROGRESS"
The Kitchen's longest-running program presents new work by up-and-coming choreographers, created during a two-month workshop. The featured artists are Erin Cornell, Morgan Thorson, and My Name & Company/Kepple+Osorio. (The Kitchen, 512 W. 19th St. 212-255-5793. Dec. 17-18 at 8.)

NIGHT LIFE
CONCERTS

WINTER SOLSTICE
The Age of Aquarius may or may not have dawned, but Paul Winter's secular celebration is in its twenty-fifth year. The Irish Uilleann-pipes player Davy Spillane, the African-American Forces of Nature Dance Theatre Ensemble, the Russian singers of the Dmitri Pokrovsky group, and the globe-trotting percussionist Glen Velez promise a transcendent multicultural experience. (Cathedral of St. John the Divine, Amsterdam Ave. at 112th St. 212-662-2133. Dec. 16-17 at 7:30 and Dec. 18 at 2 and 7:30.)

JAZZ AT LINCOLN CENTER
Modelling himself on Duke Ellington, Wynton Marsalis is a prolific composer with a penchant for grand style. His latest epic, a family-oriented work called "Suite for Human Nature," brings together the Lincoln Center Jazz Orchestra, the Boys Choir of Harlem, and the singers Milt Grayson, Allan Harris, and Jennifer Sanon. Diane Charlotte Lampert wrote the lyrics and the libretto. (Rose Theatre, Broadway at 60th St. 212-721-6500. Dec. 16-18 at 8 and Dec. 19 at 3.)

SONIA SANCHEZ
The seventy-year-old poet and activist recently recorded her first CD in twenty-five years, "Full Moon of Sonia." She gives the songs a workout here, with the help of Toshi Reagon, Amiri Baraka, and TC Carson. (Tribeca Performing Arts Center, 199 Chambers St. 212-220-1460. Dec. 17 at 7.)

SCISSOR SISTERS
Most notorious for recasting Pink Floyd's dour stadium-rock warhorse "Comfortably Numb" as a glittery dance jewel, this campy New York outfit has won international acclaim for its party-friendly update of disco pop. (Hammerstein Ballroom, Manhattan Center, 311 W. 34th St. 212-307-7171. Dec. 19 at 7:30.)

TRANS-SIBERIAN ORCHESTRA
This fancy-sounding ensemble started with one guy, many synthesizers, and a group of rented musicians. The former producer Paul O'Neill created T.S.O.'s début album, "Christmas Eve and Other Stories," in 1996, and followed two years later with "The Christmas Attic." Since then the group's mix of ersatz Christmas music, progressive rock, and Broadway splash has proved so popular that there's not just one but two T.S.O.s—between them they'll touch down in more than eighty cities across the country this holiday season. (Madison Square Garden. 212-307-7171. Dec. 27 at 8.)

CLUBS

Musicians and night-club proprietors live complicated lives; it's advisable to call ahead to confirm engagements.

BARBÈS
376 9th St., Park Slope, Brooklyn (718-965-9177)—Dec. 17: Organized by the quirksters **Life in a Blender,** the **Blowhole Theatre Holiday Marathon** gives free reign to the gleefully uninhibited. The evening's entertainment, which runs from 6 to midnight, promises music and mayhem. Dec. 18: The singer-songwriter **Cat Martino.**

B. B. KING BLUES CLUB & GRILL
237 W. 42nd St. (212-997-4144)—Dec. 17-18: The rock legend **Ronnie Spector** holds her very own Christmas spectacular. Dec. 19: The swinging ensemble **Big Bad Voodoo Daddy.** With the local group **Josh Max's Outfit.** Dec. 21: **Satyricon,** a death-metal ensemble from Norway that's popular with histrionic adolescent depressives. Dec. 25: The Hasidic reggae performer **Matisyahu** was born on the 5th of Tamuz, 5739 (or June 30, 1979), as Matthew Miller. After a youth in Westchester, a spell following the jam band Phish, and an epiphany in the Colorado Rockies, he visited Israel and found Jah. Dec. 26: **Paul Green's Original School of Rock.** You've seen the movie. Now see the stage show, straight from Philadelphia: kids who have been studying power chords since their preteen years. Dec. 27: **Sonia Dada,** a nine-piece band from Chicago, has made a career of mixing roots rock, R. & B., soul, and other genres.

BOWERY BALLROOM
6 Delancey St. (212-533-2111)—Dec. 16: The post-folk singer-songwriter **Joseph Arthur** left Peter Gabriel's Real World label for his fourth album, the newly released "Our Shadows Will Remain." He recorded it in New Orleans, where his intricately arranged pop developed a liberated, musically promiscuous sound. Dec. 18-19: The Chicago indie-rock label Drag City presents "It's a Wonderful Next Life," a Christmas party featuring three of its chief attractions. **(Smog)** is the veteran songwriter Bill Callahan. **Weird War** matches post-punk guitar with the prophetic ravings of the ex-Make-Up front man, Ian Svevonius. But the real sensation is the harpist and singer **Joanna Newsom,** whose pixielike voice and fantastic attire would be off-putting were it not for the exquisite skill of her songwriting. To accentuate the twee factor, attendees are requested to wear a sweater, plus a knit cap or scarf. Dec. 26-28: When the bassist Will Lee, from "The Late Show with David Letterman," and the guitarist Jimmy Vivino, from "Late Night with Conan O'Brien," take time off from work, they play with the **Fab Faux,** a Beatles tribute band.

BOWERY POETRY CLUB
308 Bowery, at Bleecker St. (212-614-0505)—Dec. 20: **Andy Friedman,** a Brooklyn-based visual artist and cartoonist (his work has appeared in these pages under the pseudonym Larry Hat), grew up on Long Island in the eighties, where, as he puts it, Billy Joel was his Woody Guthrie. For the past few years, he's been travelling the country, confusing promoters (they don't know how to label his shows) and winning over audiences by projecting his drawings onstage and delivering often funny, mostly extemporaneous monologues that connect the images to folk and blues standards. More recently, he added a bass-drum-and-keyboards backing band that pushes his performances into the realm of cabaret. The sex columnist and novelist **Amy Sohn** will open the show with a reading from her new book, "My Old Man."

IRVING PLAZA
17 Irving Pl., at 15th St. (212-777-6800)—Dec. 26: Chicago's **Fall Out Boy** plays energetic, uncompromising songs that are emotionally raw and punkishly aggressive.

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KNITTING FACTORY
74 Leonard St., between Broadway and Church St. (212-219-3055)—Dec. 18: The girls of **Palomar** give power pop a good name with high vocals, solid rhythms, and much repetition. With **Bella Lea,** a new band from Maura Davis, formerly of Denali. Dec. 23-25: **"What I Like About Jew,"** a musical revue created by **Sean Altman** and **Rob Tannenbaum,** celebrates its fifth anniversary, with the help of **Al Goldstein, Todd Barry, Tammy Faye Starlite, Jackie Hoffman, Cynthia Kaplan,** and other guests.

MERCURY LOUNGE
217 E. Houston St. (212-260-4700)—**50 Foot Wave** sounds like it should be a surf-rock band, but it's actually the latest outfit led by Kristin Hersh. The former Throwing Muses vocalist puts aside the mostly acoustic songs of her recent solo career in favor of heavier rock tunes. The wave hits here Dec. 17.

NORTHSIX
66 N. 6th St., Williamsburg, Brooklyn (718-599-5103)—Dec. 16: **Evan Dando,** the lank-haired former Lemonheads singer, returned from the studio last year with a graceful collection of confessional pop, "Baby I'm Bored." Dec. 17: **Elysian Fields** are a local duo made up of the guitarist Oren Bloedow and the sultry chanteuse Jennifer Charles, who have been making exceptionally languid, sensuous music since 1990.

TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Dec. 17: **Tarantula,** a quartet of violin, cello, bass, and drums, crafts noirish soundscapes. Dec. 19: The sinister sophisticates in **Botanica** throw a holiday party. With the dark country sounds of **Alice Texas.**

JAZZ AND STANDARDS

ALGONQUIN HOTEL
59 W. 44th St. (212-840-6800)—Through Dec. 30: It isn't difficult to imagine the elegant chanteuse **Andrea Marcovicci** as one of Fred Astaire's partners swirling through an R.K.O. musical of the thirties. Marcovicci has no doubt imagined the very same thing, and her new program features the great screen (and stage) songs written for the Master. Sunday afternoons and evenings through Dec. 26: **Barbara Carroll,** with **Jay Leonhart** on bass, gets a jump on the upcoming Harold Arlen centennial.

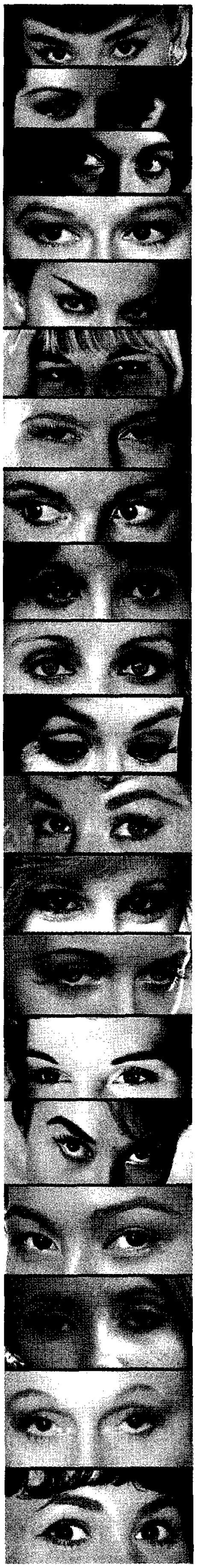
BIRDLAND
315 W. 44th St. (212-581-3080)—Dec. 14-19: The amiably swinging guitarist and singer **John Pizzarelli** usually travels light and performs with his airtight trio, but this week he gets the royal treatment, backed by a sixteen-piece big band.

BLUE NOTE
131 W. 3rd St., near Sixth Ave. (212-475-8592)—Dec. 13-15: The **Odean Pope Sax Choir.** The former Max Roach band soloist arranges intricate charts for his massed-winds ensemble. The saxophone stars **Michael Brecker** (on Dec. 13), **James Carter** (Dec. 14), and **Joe Lovano** (Dec. 15) are featured guests. Dec. 17-19: A musical institution by now, the **Manhattan Transfer** flaunts tight harmonies and infectious good humor. Dec. 21-26: It's a toss-up as to who adores Nat King Cole's music more, the pianist **Monty Alexander** or Cole's younger brother, the vocalist **Freddy.** Their holiday program includes the great brassman **Clark Terry** on the first three nights.

CARLYLE HOTEL
Madison Ave. at 76th St. (212-744-1600)—The Café Carlyle, a snug, windowless enclave in the doorman district, features discreet waiters, wraparound murals, and, through Dec. 31, **Bobby Short.**

DIZZY'S CLUB COCA-COLA
Broadway at 60th St. (212-258-9595)—Through Dec. 19: **Marcus Roberts,** the historically minded pianist and Wynton Marsalis associate, fronts a trio. Dec. 21-26: The saxophonist **Donald Harrison** joins the pianist **Cyrus Chestnut** and his trio for a program of seasonal jazz.

FEINSTEIN'S AT THE REGENCY
540 Park Ave., at 61st St. (212-339-4095)—Through Dec. 31: The high-spirited entertainer **Michael Feinstein** is a true mensch. He delivers his annual holiday program with ecumenical evenhandedness.



John Baldessari's "Twenty Gazes," at Marian Goodman.

IRIDIUM
1650 Broadway, at 51st St. (212-582-2121)—Through Dec. 19: Funk, the whole funk, and nothing but the funk. Three giants of the Hammond B3 organ—**Jimmy McGriff, Dr. Lonnie Smith,** and **Reuben Wilson**—mix it up, with the **Masters of Groove,** a trio built around the king of R. & B. drummers, **Bernard (Pretty) Purdie.** Dec. 22-26: The members of the "Four Generations of Miles" band—**Mike Stern, George Coleman, Buster Williams,** and **Jimmy Cobb**—may never have actually played together in Davis's groups, but they all share modal-bop agility and a lingering love for the Master's music. Mondays belong to the electric-guitar innovator **Les Paul.** The **Mingus Big Band** is here on Tuesdays.

JAZZ GALLERY
290 Hudson St., near Spring St. (212-242-1063)—Dec. 17-18: **Miguel Zenon,** an assured alto saxophonist with a beguiling tone who has had a striking effect on the bands of David Sanchez and Charlie Haden, leads his own quartet.

JAZZ STANDARD
116 E. 27th St. (212-576-2232)—Dec. 14-15: The new-jazz pianist and composer **Myra Melford's** latest quintet features the saxophonist **Chris Speed** and the trumpeter **Cuong Vu.** Dec. 16-19: The pianist **Pablo Ziegler** keeps the spirit of his former boss, Astor Piazolla, alive through his own vibrant tango band. Dec. 21-23: The trumpeter **Jeremy Pelt's** high-stepping lyricism has been drawing him considerable notice these days. Here he'll be backed by the **Sirius String Quartet.**

MAKOR
35 W. 67th St. (212-601-1000)—Dec. 22: The **Oliver Lake Steel Quartet.** The saxophonist Lake, a mainstay of the World Saxophone Quartet, has always had a taste for the tropics. (Witness the reggae-jazz hybrid of his Jump Up! ensemble.) This Caribbean-infused band features **Lyndon Achee** on steel pan.

SWEET RHYTHM
88 Seventh Ave. S., at Bleecker St. (212-255-3626)—Dec. 17-18: Pianists like the underrated **Junior Mance** help form the bedrock of the city's jazz scene. If his bop-and-standards repertoire is garden-variety fare, his eloquent delivery and sly wit elevate the proceedings.

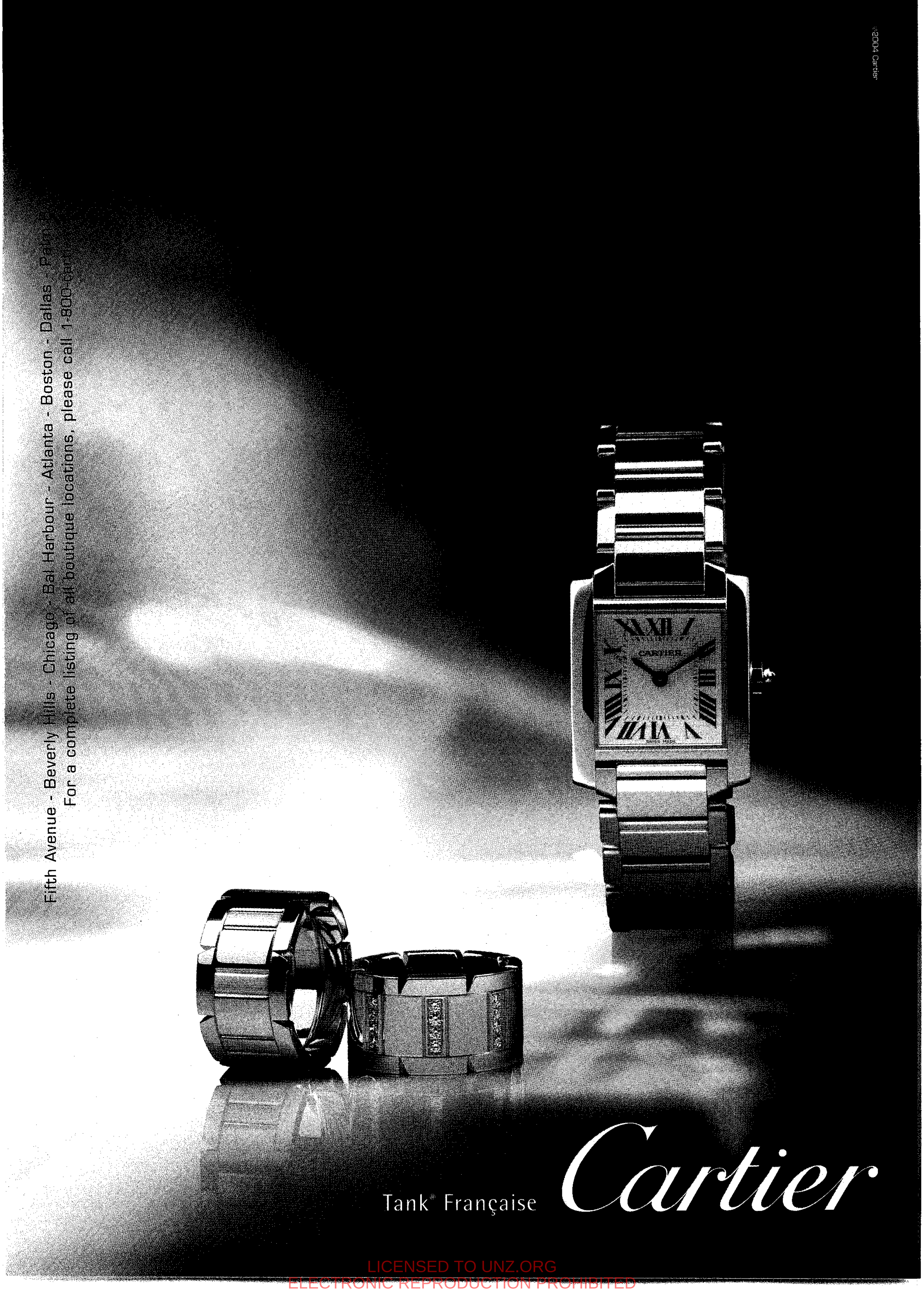
TONIC
107 Norfolk St. (212-358-7503)—Dec. 23: High spirits are part of every **Sex Mob** gig; the band's "Holiday Spectacular" holds terrific possibilities for merriment.

VILLAGE VANGUARD
178 Seventh Ave. S., at 11th St. (212-255-4037)—Take the pianist, composer, and arranger **Cedar Walton** for granted at your own risk. Few jazz musicians understand the byways of small-group dynamics quite as well as this deft stylist, a rock of indefatigable swing since his days as an early-sixties Jazz Messenger with Art Blakey. Two live-wire soloists will also be on hand, the trumpeter **Roy Hargrove** (through Dec. 19) and the saxophonist **Vincent Herring** (Dec. 21-26). The **Vanguard Jazz Orchestra** holds sway on Mondays.

ART

MUSEUMS AND LIBRARIES

METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 82nd St. (212-879-5500)—An old man in a business suit sits in a deck chair by the sea and reads the paper. Waves roll in and out, and lights flicker on in a boardwalk hotel. But then some stranger details emerge in the South African scene, giving it the feel of a dreamscape: a cow's carcass sloshes in the surf, and generals with binoculars survey it all from the hotel balcony. The film "Tide Table," at the center of the exhibition **"William Kentridge,"** is made in his signature style from animated charcoal drawings. The loose narrative is slightly upstaged by its soundtrack of gorgeous a-cappella singing; the film, like the etchings and drawings that accompany it, has an elegant melancholia. Through April 10. ♦ **"Wild: Fashion Untamed."** Clothes and accessories derived from and inspired by animals. Through March 13. ♦ **"Gilbert Stuart."** Through Jan. 16. ♦ **"Princely Splendor: The Dresden Court, 1580-1620."** Through Jan.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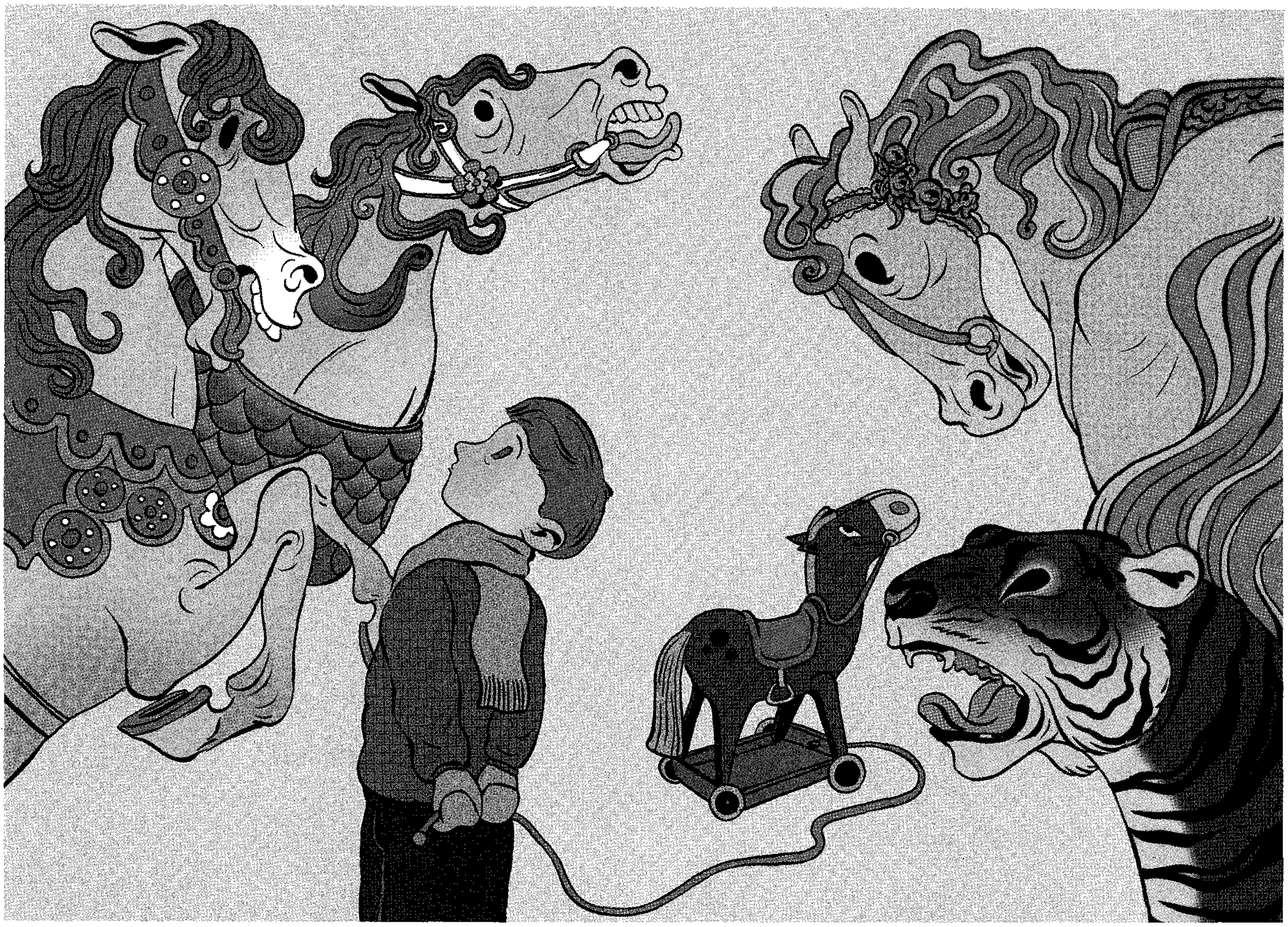


Carved and painted animals once used on children's rides, in "Carousel Art from the Charlotte Dinger Collection," at U.B.S.

ZOHAR LAZAR

30. ♦ Coincident with the Whitney's retrospective, the Met showcases a choice handful of works from its permanent collection in **"Romare Bearden at the Met."** Through March 6. ♦ A wealth of art and artifacts recovered from the tombs of ancient luminaries is on view in **"China: Dawn of a Golden Age, 200-750 A.D."** Through Jan. 23. (Open Tuesdays through Sundays, 9:30 to 5:30, and Friday and Saturday evenings until 9.)

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART

11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9400)—The museum has reopened in its renovated and enlarged home and is presenting a series of exhibits related to its metamorphosis. ♦ **"Yoshio Taniguchi: Nine Museums"** celebrates the architect and his previous art-housing projects, of which the new Modern is the first outside Japan. Plans, photographs, and sleek white models describe the spaces—which include the Higashiyama Kaii Museum, whose twin walls of green Vermont slate make it disappear into an adjacent reflecting pool, and the Shiseido Art Museum, whose gleaming edifice winds back on itself like a Möbius strip. The already famous "floating walls" of the MOMA building, and its subtle integration into the challenging site, have precedents in Taniguchi's Japanese designs, which hover in their landscapes like massive soap bubbles. Through Jan. 31. ♦ **"Michael Wesely: Open Shutter at the Museum of Modern Art."** The German photographer turned his long exposure method (he has left the shutter open for as long as three years) on MOMA while it was under construction. Through mid-2005. ♦ **"Projects 82: Mark Dion—Rescue Archaeology."** Dion excavated traces of the former Rockefeller town house from beneath the sculpture garden for this site-specific project. Through March 14. (Open Wednesdays through Mondays, 10:30 to 5:30, and Fridays, 10:30 to 8.)

GUGGENHEIM MUSEUM

Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-423-3500)—**"The Aztec Empire"** lines the Guggenheim's spiral with more than four hundred artifacts, from carvings depicting harvest work to implements for human sacrifice. Through Feb. 13. ♦ The Guggenheim has the largest collection of work by Vasily Kandinsky in the United States, and its curators have decided to devote one gallery to his work permanently. **"Kandinsky Gallery: An Inaugural Selection"** kicks things off. ♦ Among the artists represented in **"Recent Acquisitions: Contemporary Sculpture"** are Maurizio Cattelan, Robert Gober, and Tom Friedman. Through Jan. 27. (Open Saturdays through Wednesdays, 10 to 5:45, and Fridays, 10 to 8.)

WHITNEY MUSEUM OF AMERICAN ART

Madison Ave. at 75th St. (212-570-3676)—Born in Los Angeles, raised in Japan, and inspired by expatriate Paris in the nineteen-twenties, Isamu Noguchi (1904-88) was an artist for the dawning global age. Viewers who have ventured to the Noguchi Museum, in Queens, will not find their assessment transformed by the current survey, **"Isamu Noguchi: Master Sculptor."** But it does look good. From the room of "puzzle" sculptures, biomorphic shapes in wood or stone fitted together without fasteners, to a stand of the famous "Akari" rice-paper lamps, from a terra-cotta portrait bust of the artist's Zen-monk uncle to another, all in chrome, of his friend Buckminster Fuller, the work is openhearted, technically pristine, masterful indeed. Through Jan. 16. ♦ For a performance in Brussels in 1994, James Lee Byars dressed in a gold lamé suit and a black top hat and danced around a room covered on three sides with gold leaf. He died in 1997, but the three-sided room—part sculpture, part stage, blending the rational geometry of minimalism with the religious mysticism of Egyptian tombs—remains a luminous self-memorial and a fitting centerpiece to **"James Lee Byars: The Perfect Silence."** A series of huge calligraphic ink drawings inspired by Rothko and a decade spent in Japan are reminiscent of Motherwell's "Elegies," and three hundred and thirty-three hand-blown red glass balls are arranged in an abstract, curlicued formation titled "The Little Red Angel of Marseilles." Through March 6. ♦ The city's museums are full of Romare Bearden's work right now, but **"The Art of Romare Bearden"** is the biggest and most thorough show. Through Jan. 9. ♦ **"Political Nature."** Works on paper by Walton Ford, Trenton Doyle Hancock, Frank Moore, and Stephanie Syjuco. Through March 27. ♦ **"Bill Viola: Five Angels for the Millennium,"** a large-scale video installation made in 2001. Through March 6. (Open Wednesdays, Thursdays, and weekends, 11 to 6, and Fridays, 1 to 9.)

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF NATURAL HISTORY

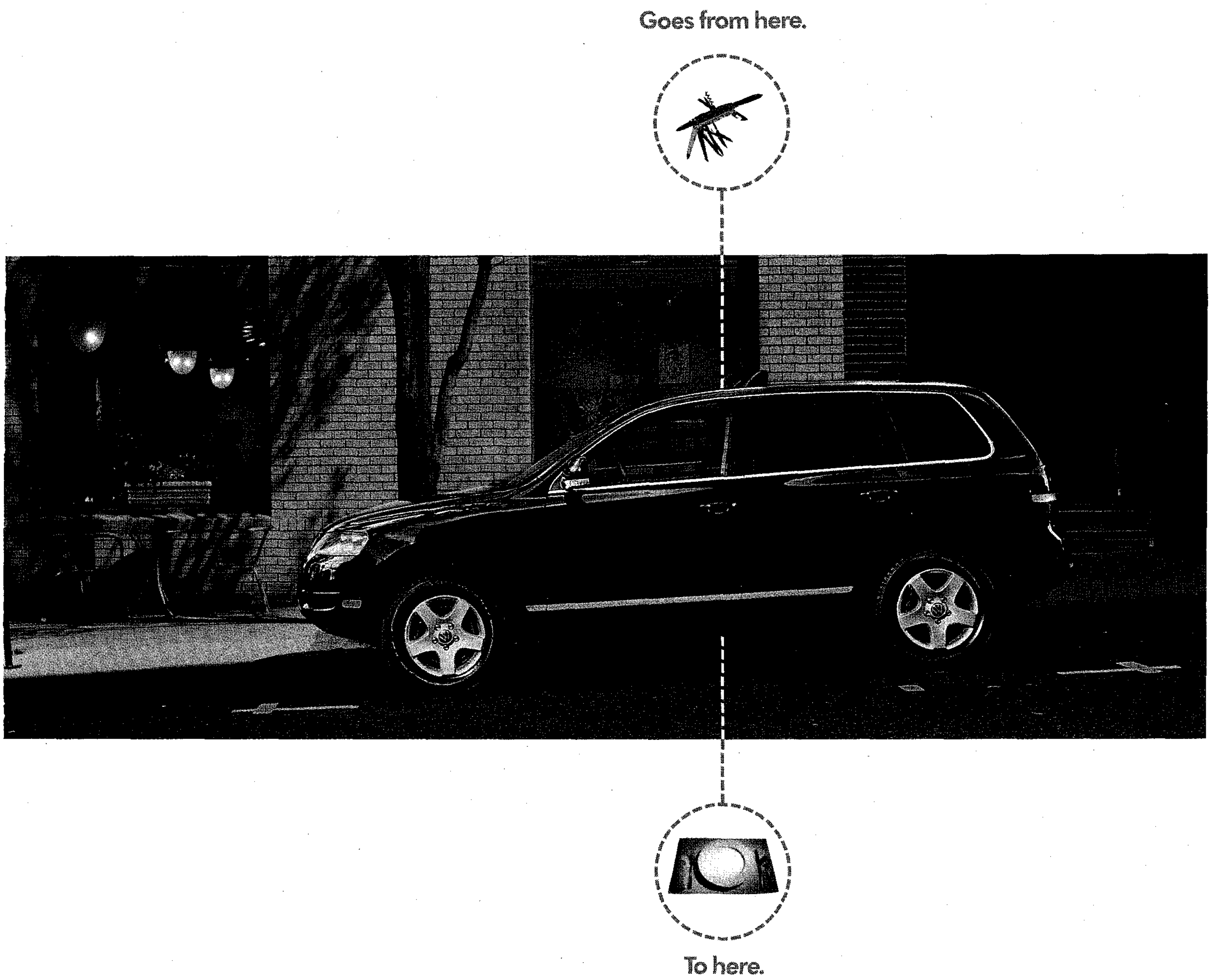
Central Park W. at 79th St. (212-769-5100)—**"Totems to Turquoise: Native North American Jewelry Arts of the Northwest and Southwest."** Through July 10. ♦ **"Frogs: A Chorus of Colors"** presents some two hundred frogs in glass-walled habitats. Through Jan. 9. ♦ **"The Butterfly Conservatory: Tropical Butterflies Alive in Winter."** Through May 30. (Open daily, 10 to 5:45.)

BROOKLYN MUSEUM OF ART

200 Eastern Parkway (718-638-5000)—**"Great Expectations: John Singer Sargent Painting Children."** Included here are scenes of beaches and birthday parties and portraits of rich society kids and the progeny of Sargent's artistic peers. The children's luminous beauty is made poignant by wall texts describing what became of them amid the next century's wars and upheaval. Through Jan. 16. (Open Wednesdays through Fridays, 10 to 5, and Saturdays and Sundays, 11 to 6.)

FRICK COLLECTION

1 E. 70th St. (212-288-0700)—Raphael's **"La Fornarina"** is visiting the United States for the first time ever. The lush and enigmatic nude portrait, historically believed to show the artist's mistress, has been subject to as much speculation as the Mona Lisa, her every detail examined for clues. Is she raising her translucent veil in modesty or coyness? Is that a wedding ring on her finger? Do her bare smile and side-cast eyes indicate flirtatious in-



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vitation, or distraction, or amusement? Situated in the center of a room occupied by full-length, fully clad Gainsborough and Van Dyck portraits, she looks intimate, mischievous, sensuous. Through Jan. 30. ♦ **"European Bronzes from the Quentin Collection."** Through Jan. 2. (Open Tuesdays through Saturdays, 10 to 6, and Sundays, 1 to 6.)

NATIONAL ACADEMY MUSEUM
Fifth Ave. at 89th St. (212-369-4880)—The French artist Xavier Veilhan has installed five paintings in a black two-room cube, calling it **"The Photorealist Project."** The paintings are embedded in the walls sans frames, and are dimly lit by a few stand-up rods on the floor; the paintings look like screens at a drive-in movie, the space like a disco. But it's great to see these monuments to the mundane together, including Robert Bechtle's "Roses" (1973), with three women admiring a bit of landscaping; Ralph Goings's "Blue GMC," an ode to car culture; and Richard Estes's 1974 view of Times Square. Why should Gerhard Richter be beatified when American Photo-Realism has been treated as regressive or conservative among Greenberg's acolytes of abstraction? It's nice to see these paintings getting some play, albeit in this strangely mannered setting. Through Jan. 2. (Open Wednesdays and Thursdays, noon to 5, and Fridays through Sundays, 11 to 6.)

RUBIN MUSEUM OF ART
150 W. 17th St. (212-620-5000)—This newly opened museum is Manhattan's first devoted entirely to Himalayan art. (Open Tuesdays and Saturdays, 11 to 7; Wednesdays and Sundays, 11 to 5; and Thursdays and Fridays, 11 to 9.)

GALLERIES—UPTOWN

Unless otherwise noted, galleries are open Tuesdays through Saturdays, from around 10 or 11 to between 5 and 6.

JOHN BALDESSARI
New work from the California-based artist that examines the relationship between painting and photography, and how each changes the way we see the other. In his "windows" series, large black-and-white film stills are partially obscured by vividly colored painted shapes; in his "columns," photographs that share single subjects are arranged into long, echoing rows. Through Jan. 8. (Marian Goodman, 24 W. 57th St. 212-977-7160.)

MARY CASSATT
Fifty counterproofs (ca. 1905-15) made by pressing damp sheets of Japanese paper over pastel drawings to produce mirror images of the originals. Cassatt's reversed signatures would tip you off if the slick surfaces didn't. The colors are dimmer than in the originals, but the drawing is still remarkably detailed. The subjects are predictable, with mothers and children dominating the group. An adjacent room contains drypoint and aquatint prints, including a series called "The Bath," which reveals the extraordinary impact of Asian art on Cassatt, who, with her pal Degas, was caught up in the *japonisme* craze of fin-de-siècle France. Through Jan. 14. (Adelson at the Mark Hotel, 25 E. 77th St. 212-439-6800.)

BENJAMIN EDWARDS
Edwards's work, based on downloaded satellite maps, city plans, and architectural renderings, actually looks more authoritative and accurate than much digital art. Canvases like "Automatic City" and "Immersion" merge Renaissance perspectival painting with urban-planning schemes and computer circuitry. Bits of subdivisions and the corporate landscape of big box stores also pop up. It's hard to tell whether Edwards is utopian or dystopian; he might be a little bit of both. Through Dec. 30. (Greenberg Van Doren, 730 Fifth Ave. 212-445-0444.)

"CAROUSEL ART FROM THE CHARLOTTE DINGER COLLECTION"
Forty carved and painted creatures constructed between 1890 and 1920 for carousels. Their makers compensated for the animals' lifelong circular paths by giving them lavishly imagined, richly executed embellishments. Through Jan. 3. (U.B.S., 1285 Sixth Ave., at 51st St. 212-713-2885.)

Anders Petersen's "Café Lehmitz, Hamburg 1970," at Marvelli.

Short List

ADOLPH GOTTLIEB
Pace Wildenstein, 32 E. 57th St. 212-421-3292.
Through Dec. 31.

ALFRED LESLIE
Stone, 113 E. 90th St. 212-987-4997.
Through Dec. 22.

A. R. PENCK
Werner, 4 E. 77th St. 212-988-1623.
Through Jan. 20.

GALLERIES—CHELSEA

DELIA BROWN
Brown's new paintings include a mussed but glamorous self-portrait, several bohemian party scenes, and a group portrait of the curators of the recent Whitney Biennial, cocktails in hand in a swank apartment; the collective vibe is "Sex and the City" meets art world. Sly references to representation abound—there are paintings of drawings and paintings of snapshots, not to mention the obvious inference that the paintings themselves are made from photographs. Brown's interest in oil portraiture as a viable document of contemporary life has a pleasing, retro cheekiness. But, alas, this also highlights a rather wooden quality in her figures—the scene of gals eyeing a male model in a life-drawing class might point the way forward. Through Dec. 23. (D'Amelio Terras, 525 W. 22nd St. 212-352-9460.)

KEITH EDMIER
Edmier's efforts to cast sculpture from molten lava may have failed, but here are the consolation-prize results: a duo of palmlike cycads, "Cycas Orogeny," with bases made from melted basalt lava. Chosen for their ancient biological origins and overtly sexy appearance, they're lovely curiosities, though they provide no more illumination than a trip to the botanical garden might. A sculpture of a male seahorse with a litter of infants in his belly is delicately crafted, but it's probably more impressive to the natural-science crowd than to the acolytes of Duchamp. Through Jan. 15. (Petzel, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9467.)

JACCO OLIVIER
It's hard to paint a swimming polar bear; a static medium can't easily do justice to those paired themes of ungainliness and grace. Film is better suited, and Olivier does a creditable job of uniting the two strategies in his short animation, made by photographing a series of sketchy paintings of the subject. Olivier's "moving pictures" are presented on small video monitors, with nary a canvas in sight; other screens show a striding surfer, a baby peeping over its mother's shoulder, the earth spinning in space, a bug crawling through the giant hairs on an arm. The bear and its friends are a one-trick pony, but it's a good trick. Through Dec. 23. (Boesky, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-680-9889.)

RAYMOND PETTIBON
The wantonly eccentric stock characters who have for years made up Pettibon's world of diaristic cartoon erudition are back in this new work—the baseball players, the Gumby figures quoting Henry James, the naked people and naked light bulbs, the towering waves and philosophical surfers. But some departures are made, too—the installation of clustered drawings pinned to the walls is more tightly edited than usual, and Pettibon has made a dreamy, low-tech animation that loops on a large monitor. There are also some new tropes, as in the drawings filled with military headstones. Through Dec. 24. (Zwirner, 525 W. 19th St. 212-727-2070.)

DAVID REED
Reed's new paintings are marked by swoops of bright, waxy color, translucent in places to show the white underpainting, elsewhere dense and hot against a contrasting hue. The effect is as if a milk-glass display window were soaped with alizarin crimson or cobalt teal. Preparatory drawings included with the big imposing paintings refer in scribbled notes to the Tree of Knowledge, children's dreams, and "Munch's mystical shore." But such heady allusions vanish in the finished images—they're splashy and good to look at, but their intellectual underpinnings are too deeply buried to see. Through Dec. 23. (Protetch, 511 W. 22nd St. 212-633-6999.)

Short List

ROZ CHAST
Saul, 535 W. 22nd St. 212-627-2410.
Through Jan. 29.

HANS-PETER FELDMANN
303 Gallery, at 525 W. 22nd St. 212-255-1121.
Through Jan. 8.
JESPER JUST
Rubenstein, 527 W. 23rd St. 212-627-8000.
Through Dec. 23.
ROBERT RYMAN
Pace Wildenstein, 534 W. 25th St.
212-421-3292. Through Jan. 8.
TERRY WINTERS
Marks, 523 W. 24th St. 212-243-0200.
Through Dec. 24.
CHRISTOPHER WOOL
Luhring Augustine, 531 W. 24th St.
212-206-9100. Through Dec. 23.

PHOTOGRAPHY

BILL BRANDT
On the centennial of his birth, this show provides the chance to see Brandt's influential series of black-and-white nudes, done for the most part in the nineteen-forties and fifties. Originally an assistant to Man Ray, Brandt was friendly with Brassaï, whose "Paris de Nuit" inspired him to produce documentary work. His pictures of the English aristocracy and working people, industrialization in Northern England, and the effects of the Second World War established his career. The vintage prints here are surrealistic nudes—foreshortened limbs or mounds of flesh—shot with a wide-angle lens in stark tonal contrast. (Houk, 745 Fifth Ave. 212-750-7070. Through Jan. 8.)

GERMAINE KRULL
A small group of unapologetic black-and-white prints from the nineteen-twenties depict two women in the midst of a passionate affair. The pictures, which are in soft focus, have an intimate feel—the women are shown laughing, smoking cigarettes, and in contorted lovemaking positions on a draped couch—that was certainly shocking for their time. Krull, a pioneering German female photographer, was well known for her modernist industrial shots and her work with the French Resistance. She moved to Bangkok after the Second World War, where she was the director of the Oriental Hotel, and in the sixties she became a Buddhist and moved to India. Through Dec. 24. (Silverstein, 535 W. 24th St. 212-627-3930.)

LOUISE LAWLER
Lawler goes behind the scenes at museums and art fairs, photographing art in various states of undress. A well-known Gerhard Richter painting, "Ema (Nude on a Staircase)," which echoes Duchamp's famous work, lies on its side in a MOMA gallery. In another photograph, Maurizio Cattelan's huge papier-mâché Picasso head, which he commissioned an actor to wear around MOMA in 1998, glares out from under plastic. Behind it hangs a Thomas Struth photograph of visitors wandering through the Metropolitan. This is true insider's art, and a return to form for Lawler. Through Dec. 23. (Metro Pictures, 519 W. 24th St. 212-206-7100.)

ANDERS PETERSEN
Stark and grainy black-and-white images by a Swedish photographer. A series of small prints show people in a mental institution—a Patti Smith look-alike pulls her hair, a man lies on his bed flicking ashes on the sheet. A more recent body of work, more diaristic in subject matter, is seemingly haphazardly hung, with some prints so high on the wall that they are difficult to see. These pictures recall Nan Goldin's use of family and friends, but the high-contrast images are harsher and colder, while still feeling intimate and personal. The gallery's back room is hung with prints from the sixties and seventies made in a seedy Hamburg bar; the patrons seem to be having the time of their lives even when they're about to punch each other in the face. Through Jan. 31. (Marvelli, 526 W. 26th St. 212-627-3363.)

"STAGING HAPPINESS"
This craftily curated show begins with vintage photographs from the mid-thirties that represent the vestiges of the Russian avant-garde—Georgy Petrusov's image of Vera Mukhina's famous "Monument to the Workers and Peasant Women," doubled in a reflecting pool; Alexander Rodchenko's stern soldiers under a "Workers of the World Unite!" banner. A staged image from Max Alpert's famous "Twenty-four Hours in the Life of the Filippov Family" was meant to convince non-Communist eyes that life in the U.S.S.R. was simply grand. Postwar photographs are heavily retouched and hand-painted, in some cases to the point of complete fabrication, culminating in the unforgettable scene of Lenin and Stalin chatting on a park bench. Through Dec. 30. (Nailya Alexander, 24 W. 57th St. 212-315-2211.)

INTERNATIONAL CENTER OF PHOTOGRAPHY
Three important photographers, Bill Owens, Ralph Eugene Meatyard, and E. J. Bellocq, provide a primer of sorts on twentieth-century American portraiture. Meatyard, an optician by trade who was from Lexington, Kentucky, died young in 1972, at the height of his powers. He took eerie, surrealistic pictures of his friends and family, often posed wearing plastic masks. This is the largest show of the photographer's work ever seen in New York, with a hundred and fifty images that span his too short career. Bellocq photographed prostitutes in their rooms around 1912 in a straightforward, respectful way. The work was forgotten until Lee Friedlander discovered Bellocq's glass negatives in a New Orleans antique shop. I.C.P. has a selection of Friedlander's prints, shown at MOMA in 1970, and recently discovered vintage prints. Bill Owens's book "Suburbia" made him an instant star when it was published in 1972. His pictures of young families in their new tract homes in Livermore, California, spoke to Western migration, consumer culture, and shifting cultural mores. These equally canny pictures, entitled "Leisure," were taken about ten years later, just before Owens quit photography and opened a microbrewery. Through Feb. 27. (1133 Sixth Ave. 212-857-0045.)

Short List

ROSWELL ANGIER
Gitterman, 170 E. 75th St. 212-734-0868.
Through Jan. 29.
BEATE GÜTSCHOW
Danziger, 521 W. 26th St. 212-629-6778.
Through Jan. 15.

AUCTIONS AND ANTIQUES

SOTHEBY'S
Dec. 16 at 10:15 A.M. and 2: A sale of carpets. ♦ Dec. 17 at 10:15 A.M.: After thirty-five years in the business, Barry Friedman, a dealer of Art Nouveau, Art Deco, and modernist design and art, is moving on to the field of contemporary decorative arts, and has decided to put up more than two hundred pieces from his prewar collection in a sale of French, Austrian, and Swedish furniture—rich in works by Josef Hoffmann (including his 1905 Corbu-inspired "Sitzmachine"), Jacques-Emile Ruhlmann, and the neoclassically inspired Carl Malmsten. ♦ Dec. 17 at 2: This sale of twentieth-century decorative arts centers on the private collection of two California architects and brothers, Charles and Henry Greene—the largest such auction to date, featuring such items as a stunning leaded-glass-and-mahogany hall lantern from 1908, inspired by *japonisme*. The sale also includes works by Frank Lloyd Wright and the Tiffany studios. ♦ Dec. 18 at 10:15 A.M.: Twentieth-century visions of the future age gracefully in this single-owner sale of modernist furniture by Le Corbusier, Jean Prouvé, Charlotte Perriand, and Pierre Jeanneret. A sleek library table circa 1951, fashioned from oak and lacquered metal, from the Maison de L'Étudiant, is the auction's centerpiece, but many smaller items, such as a scraped-up auditorium chair by Prouvé, exhibit a quiet charm that's only been enhanced by their use and wear. ♦ Dec. 18 at 11 A.M.: This sale of design from the twentieth century rounds up a group of pieces by two members of the talented and eccentric Bugatti family. Rembrandt (son of Carlo), delicate and depressive, specialized in bronze animal sculptures inspired by the inhabitants of the Jardin des Plantes in Paris, and the sale includes one of his lions, in contented repose. The undisputed star of the sale is a huge, fourteen-panel screen by Jean Dunand in different

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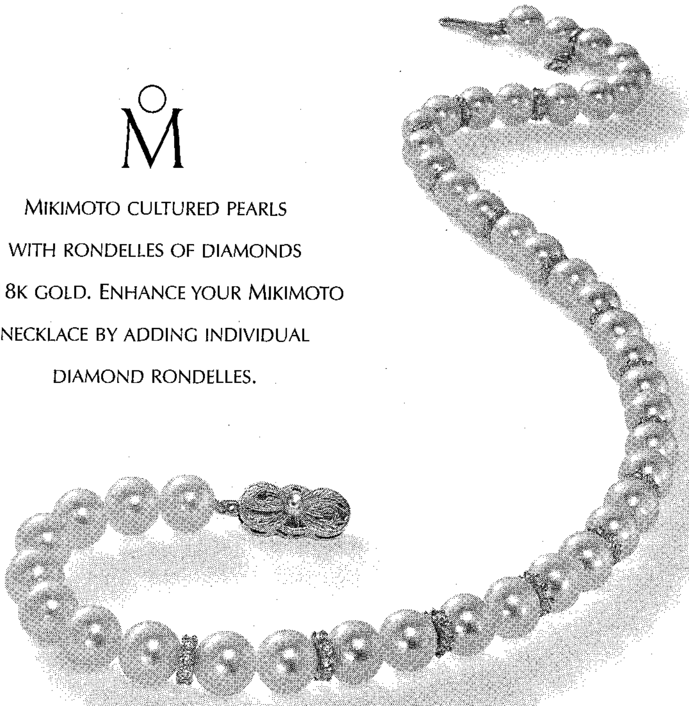

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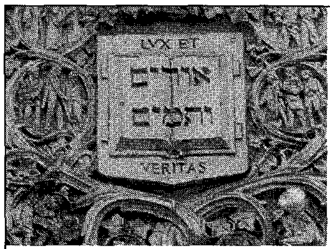

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shades of gold leaf and gold and brass powder, appropriately entitled "Sunrise/Sunset." (York Ave. at 72nd St. 212-606-7000.)

CHRISTIE'S

Dec. 15 at 10 A.M.: An auction of European and Oriental carpets. ♦ Dec. 15 at 10 A.M. and 2 and Dec. 16 at 10 A.M.: Two collections of unique Madeira distinguish this sale of fine and rare wines, which focusses on Spanish reds and historic sherry. ♦ Dec. 16 at 10 A.M.: This sale of fine printed books and manuscripts stands out for the Americana portion. Edward Sheriff Curtis's forty-volume ethnographic landmark, "The North American Indian" (introduced by Teddy Roosevelt), and Prince Maximilian zu Wied-Neuwied's nineteenth-century "Voyage dans l'Intérieur de l'Amérique du Nord" (with illustrations by Karl Bodmer), each expected to take in more than a quarter of a million dollars, recall a time when Indians inhabited the land and the French were its chroniclers. ♦ Dec. 17 at 10 A.M. and 2: This sale of rock-and-roll and entertainment memorabilia neatly incorporates the eclecticism and fanaticism of the genre: guitars played by George Harrison and Keith Richards in the sixties (estimates on request), previously unheard John Lennon interview tapes, Jimi Hendrix's junior-high-school yearbook photo, Madonna's veil from the "Like a Virgin" video, and Elvis's army trenchcoat. (20 Rockefeller Plaza, at 49th St. 212-636-2000.)

SWANN

Dec. 16 at 10:30 A.M.: An unusually fluid and evocative poster by Toulouse-Lautrec ("La Chanson du Matelot") along with an exceptionally severe example of Steinlen's work ("La Maternelle") are among the highlights of a sale of Art Nouveau posters. (104 E. 25th St. 212-254-4710.)

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OPERA

METROPOLITAN OPERA

Dec. 15, Dec. 22, and Dec. 27 at 7:30 and Dec. 18 at 8: Stephen Wadsworth's production of **"Rodelinda,"** the first the Met has mounted, is a triumph for all concerned—not least for Handel, whose decorous world of da-capo arias and impossibly noble characters has rarely seemed more lively. Renée Fleming and David Daniels keep the trills and roulades going through to the end, with Stephanie Blythe, Bejun Mehta, Kobie van Rensburg, and John Relyea also contributing strong performances; the expert early-music conductor Harry Bicket, adding recorders, lutes, and harpsichord to the pit, lightens the Met Orchestra's sound and makes it dance. (David Walker, in his début, replaces Daniels on Dec. 18; Oren Gradus replaces Relyea on Dec. 18 and Dec. 22.) ♦ Dec. 16 and Dec. 20 at 8: Offenbach's **"Les Contes d'Hoffmann,"** with Ramón Vargas (in the title role), Aleksandra Kurzak, Hei-Kyung Hong, Béatrice Uria-Monzon, Ruxandra Donose, James Morris, and Jean-Paul Fouchécourt; Fréderic Chaslin conducts. ♦ Dec. 23 at 7:30: With Patricia Racette, Katharine Goeldner, and Gregg Fedderly replacing Hong, Donose, and Fouchécourt. ♦ Dec. 17 at 8, Dec. 21 at 7:30, and Dec. 25 at 1:30: Karita Mattila, the Finnish soprano who gave a stunning performance as Salome last spring, returns to do justice to a more mature but equally desperate character: the title role in **"Kát'a Kabanová,"** the first of the great operas that Janáček produced near the end of his life. She is joined by Magdalena Kožena, Judith Forst, Jorma Silvasti (in his début), Chris Merritt, Raymond Very, and Vladimir Ognovenko; Jiří Belohlávek, one of the most admired Czech conductors of our time, conducts. ♦ Dec. 18 at 1: Otto Schenk's production of **"Tannhäuser,"** sung magnificently by Deborah Voigt, Thomas Hampson, and Peter Seiffert, among others; Mark Elder. (This is the final performance.) ♦ Dec. 24 at 7 and Dec. 28 at 8: The Met's durable production of **"Il Barbiere di Siviglia"** makes its season première on Christmas Eve, with a cast headed by Katarina Karnéus, Matthew Polenzani, Dwayne Croft, Carlos Chausson (a début), and John Relyea; Maurizio Benini. (Metropolitan Opera House. 212-362-6000.)

AMATO OPERA
If there's any opera that suits this company's intimate East Village theatre, it's **"La Bohème,"** complete with starving artists and boisterous city scenes. (Amato Opera Theatre, 319 Bowery, at 2nd St. 212-228-8200. Dec. 18 at 7:30 and Dec. 19 and Dec. 26 at 2:30.)

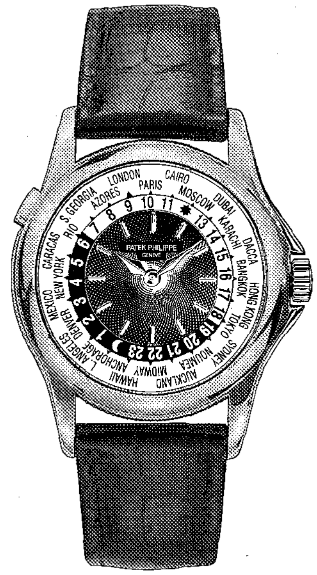
ORCHESTRAS AND CHORUSES

"MESSIAH"
Handel's glorious "entertainment" on sacred themes never lacks for performances come holiday time; here are some of the best. Dec. 14 and Dec. 16 at 7:30: The Saint Thomas Choir has always offered a "Messiah" of impeccable pedigree, sung in New York's most beautiful Episcopal church. John Scott, their new director, conducts the performances, which also feature the early-music band Concert Royal, the soprano Amanda Balestrieri, the countertenor Thomas Dinan, the tenor Scot Cameron, and the bass Christopher Trueblood. (St. Thomas Church, Fifth Ave. at 53rd St. 212-664-9360.) ♦ Dec. 19-20 at 8: The venerable Richard Westenburg celebrates his fortieth anniversary at the helm of the professional Musica Sacra Chorus and Orchestra, which offers "Messiah" in two performances at Carnegie Hall. (212-247-7800.) ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: The National Choral Council presents its annual "Messiah Sing-In," in which the audience (up to three thousand strong) gets to sing, under the direction of seventeen prominent conductors; bring a score, or buy one at the door. (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-333-5333.) ♦ Dec. 21 at 8: The Oratorio Society of New York, which sang its first "Messiah" under Leopold Damrosch in 1873, continues its Carnegie Hall tradition under the direction of Lyndon Woodside; the soloists include the soprano Jennifer Aylmer and the Met basso James Courtney, accompanied by the Westchester Philharmonic. (212-247-7800.)

NEW YORK PHILHARMONIC
The New York Philharmonic, which unexpectedly entered the "Messiah" stakes two years ago, will offer an impressive version under the young American conductor Alan Gilbert. The vocal soloists, all superb, include the mezzo-soprano Nancy Maultsby and the bass-baritone Jonathan Lemalu, joined by the Westminster Symphonic Choir. (Riverside Church, Riverside Dr. at 120th St. 212-875-5656. Dec. 15-16 at 7:30 and Dec. 17-18 at 8.) ♦ The mezzo-soprano Lorraine Hunt Lieberson is making her Philharmonic début with Britten's solo cantata "Phaedra," a searing setting of Racine's poem (in the Robert Lowell translation) about the ancient queen's suicidal lust for her stepson. Colin Davis, the conductor, balances out the work's extreme emotions with music by Mozart and Haydn (the "Paris" and "Drumroll" Symphonies, respectively); Lieberson also contributes an aria from "La Clemenza di Tito." (Dec. 16 at 7:30 and Dec. 17-18 at 8.) (Avery Fisher Hall. 212-875-5656.)

CHOIR OF KING'S COLLEGE, CAMBRIDGE
Two major works—Poulenc's "Four Christmas Motets" and the young Britten's choral suite "A Ceremony of Carols"—highlight a program with Britain's most beloved choir, which also features dulcet miniatures by Elizabeth Poston, Judith Weir, and Ralph Vaughan Williams. (Church of St. Ignatius Loyola, Park Ave. at 84th St. 212-721-6500. Dec. 15 at 8.)

NEW YORK STRING ORCHESTRA
Carnegie Hall's proud holiday tradition, a convocation of young virtuosos led by the violinist and conductor Jaime Laredo. Dec. 24 at 7: Friendly music by Bach, Wagner, and Saint-Saëns (the Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso, with the violinist Gil Shaham, who will also play Dvořák's Romance in F Minor). ♦ Dec. 28 at 8: The pianists Leon Fleisher and Katherine Jacobson and the bassoonist Frank Morelli are among the special guests for an all-Mozart program (including the Concerto for Two Pianos, K. 242, and the "Haffner" Symphony). (212-247-7800.)



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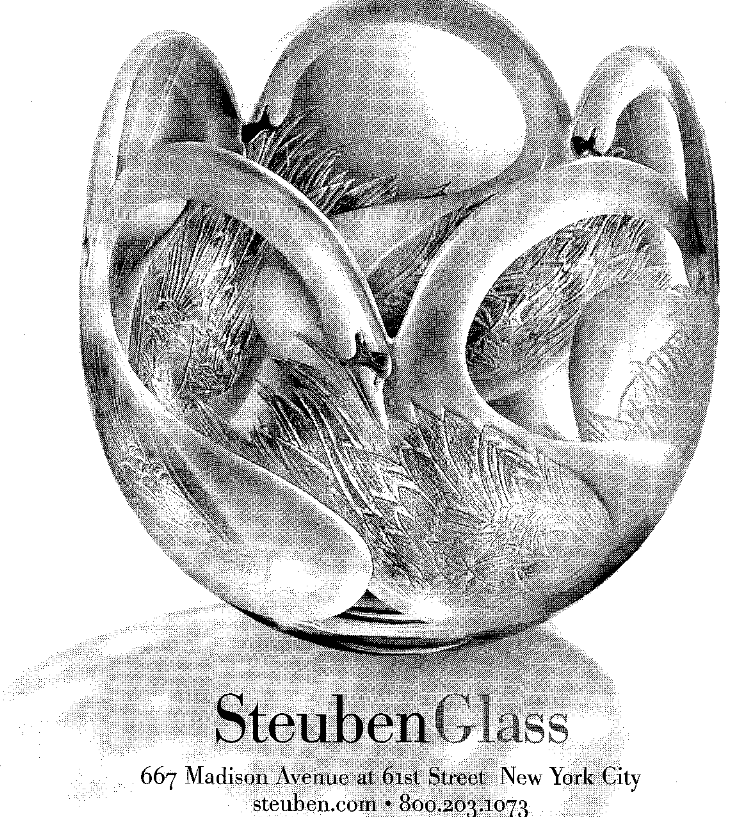

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RECITALS

"CHAMBER MUSIC AT THE Y"
Fifty years ago, several of the country's most talented string players—Jaime Laredo, John Dalley, Arnold Steinhardt, Michael Tree, and Ronald Leonard—met at the Curtis Institute of Music and formed lasting friendships. They celebrate with a concert of Viola Quintets by Mozart (in C Minor) and Dvořák (in E-Flat Major), along with Mendelssohn's Octet, at the 92nd Street Y; joining them are Laredo's wife, the cellist Sharon Robinson, and two young Curtis students. (Lexington Ave. at 92nd St. 212-415-5500. Dec. 14-15 at 8.)

"STEVEN ISSERLIS AND FRIENDS"
The marking of Dvořák's death centenary, which seemed to begin sluggishly, reaches a Yuletide climax with a concert by the superb English cellist and several colleagues (including the violinist Joshua Bell) that features not only favorite works (such as the String Quintet in E-Flat Major, "American") but a novelty item as well (the Piano Quintet No. 1 in A Major, Op. 5, not the much more famous quintet in the same key). (Zankel Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 16 at 7:30.)

BARGEMUSIC
Dec. 16-17 at 7:30: The violinists Mark Peskanov and Jonathan Gandelsman, the violist Kirstin Johnson, and the cellist Mark Johnson begin a survey of Beethoven's Op. 18 string quartets with the Quartets Nos. 1-3. ♦ Dec. 18 at 7:30 and Dec. 19 at 4: The Quartets Nos. 4-6. ♦ Dec. 24 at 7:30: There can be few more pleasant ways to pass a Christmas Eve than at the Barge, where the pianist Steven Beck offers his third annual performance of Bach's Goldberg Variations, complete with refreshments and a crackling fire. (Fulton Ferry Landing, Brooklyn. 718-624-2083.)

NEW YORK PHILOMUSICA
The chamber ensemble (featuring the pianist Rieko Aizawa) offers music by Mozart, Hummel, and Brahms (the Piano Trio No. 1 in B Major). (Merkin Concert Hall, 129 W. 67th St. 212-501-3330. Dec. 16 at 8.)

MUSIC AT THE METROPOLITAN MUSEUM
Dec. 17 at 8: Musicians from Marlboro perform works by Bach, Kurtág, and Brahms (the String Sextet No. 2 in G Major). (Grace Rainey Rogers Auditorium.) ♦ Dec. 20 at 6:30 and 8:30: The New York Philharmonic's Principal Brass Quintet winds up the museum's holiday concerts with a program of holiday favorites. (Medieval Sculpture Hall.) (Fifth Ave. at 83rd St. 212-570-3949.)

MUSIC AT THE MORRIS-JUMEL MANSION
A notable group of singers and players (including the tenor Benjamin Sosland and the harpsichordist Rebecca Pechefsky) gather in the octagonal drawing room of Manhattan's oldest house to offer festive motets and duets by Handel, Corelli, and Geminiani. (65 Jumel Terrace. 212-923-8008. Dec. 18 at 2.)

ANNE SOFIE VON OTTER: "HOME FOR THE HOLIDAYS"
The Swedish mezzo-soprano offers a concert of folk music and Christmas classics. (See This Week.) (Alice Tully Hall. 212-721-6500. Dec. 18 at 8.)

MET CHAMBER ENSEMBLE
James Levine conducts in a program of Bach (the Cantata No. 82, "Ich habe genug," with the baritone Mariusz Kwiecien), Wuorinen, and Schubert (the Octet). (Weill Recital Hall, Carnegie Hall. 212-247-7800. Dec. 19 at 5.)

CHAMBER MUSIC SOCIETY OF LINCOLN CENTER: THE BRANDENBURG CONCERTOS
An all-star lineup of the Society's artist members (including Edgar Meyer, Tara Helen O'Connor, Clancy Newman, and David Shifrin, who will play the Second Concerto's trumpet part on an E-Flat clarinet) gather to perform Bach's joyful masterworks. (Dec. 19 at 5 and Dec. 21 at 7:30.)

JANE MARSH: "DAS MARIENLEBEN"
The veteran soprano, accompanied by Linda Hall, offers a performance of Hindemith's rarely heard song cycle, a setting of fifteen poems on the life of the Virgin Mary by Rilke. (Austrian Cultural Forum, 11 E. 52nd St. Dec. 20 at 8. For free tickets, which are required, call 212-319-5300, ext. 222.)

ABOVE AND BEYOND

READINGS

Dec. 14 at 7: A night of erotic tales, with Rachel Kramer Brussel, Meredith Broussard, and David Boyer. (K.G.B., 85 E. 4th St. No tickets necessary.) ♦ Dec. 19 at 3: Roger Angell, an editor at this magazine, is the host of an afternoon reading from the anthology "Christmas at *The New Yorker*," with Malachy McCourt, James Naughton, and Tony Roberts. (Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. 212-864-5400.) ♦ Dec. 22 at 8: Robert Sullivan, the author of such nonfiction books as "The Meadowlands" and "Rats," reads from "Flight of the Reindeer," his hard-hitting investigation into the Christmas legend. (Rocky Sullivan's, 129 Lexington Ave., between 28th and 29th Sts. No tickets necessary.)

HOLIDAY OUTINGS

Dec. 24 at 1: Big Onion Walking Tours offers a Christmas Eve stroll through Greenwich Village, with stops at St. Luke-in-the-Fields, for a reading of Clement Clark Moore's "A Visit from St. Nicholas" and at Chumley's, for something stronger. ♦ Dec. 25 at 1: Tour leaders head for Chinatown. ♦ Dec. 26 at 10:30 A.M. and 1: The Big Onion presents its fourteenth annual Christmas-weekend tour of the Jewish Lower East Side. (For more information about all the walks, call 212-439-1090.)

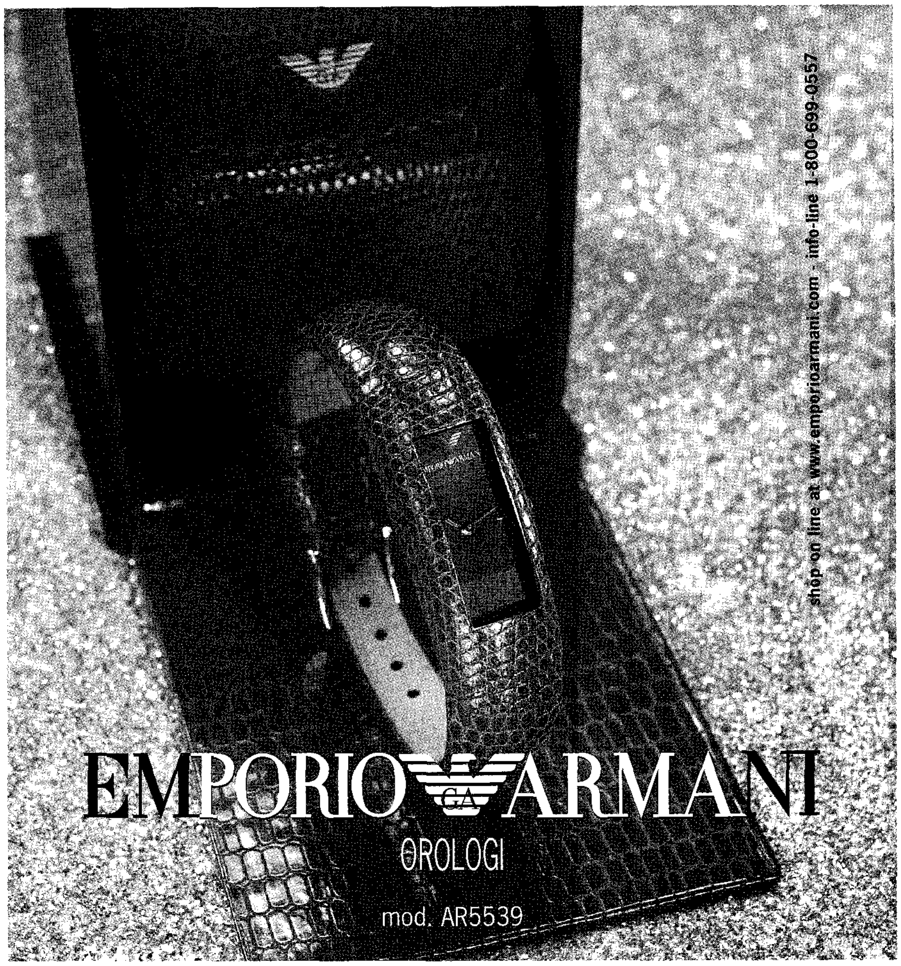
TABLES FOR TWO

MEGU

62 Thomas St., at West Broadway (212-964-7777)—"Twenty-seven hours ago, a tuna was swimming in Oma Bay"—a waiter at this sleek new Japanese restaurant said the other night, as he wriggled his hands like a slippery fish through water—"and now he's on your table at Megu." Indeed, the sushi selection, centered on several cuts of *hon-maguro* tuna, is glisteningly fresh, if small. The greater portion of the *kaiseki*-style menu is lavish and poetically obfuscating, with a foreword that dedicates the diner's palate to umami, the fifth taste. Delicately proportioned (and punitively priced) dishes, meant for sharing, are served with ceremonial flair, from the scaly root of wasabi grated on a slab of sharkskin to the Nakagawa River stone, where diners can lightly grill thin, tender, fat-streaked strips of Kobe beef. An enigmatic menu item boasts wild scallops and "mystery twin"—a small bite of turnip hidden among the creamy, sesame-encrusted shellfish. Crisp asparagus spears come in a jacket of spicy rice-cracker batter.

Megu, the first U.S. outpost of Koji Imai's Japanese-restaurant empire, has been open since March (a second will open here next fall), and its grand ambitions are apparent. The restaurant's distinction, according to one server, is its commitment to the smallest details of the supply chain: rice grown to specific conditions in Oregon and fish caught with lines and poles rather than nets, because "fish don't like to be stressed." The effect on diners, however, can be less than relaxing: each party's entrance into the cavernous dining room prompts a conversation-shattering cry of "*Irashaimase*" ("welcome"). The volume is amplified by the number of staff, who wear hand-painted shirts or kimono-style dresses brought from Japan and who swoop down at the slightest sign of need, or as the last morsel of food is lifted from a plate. The centerpiece of the menacingly luxurious room is a replica of the enormous Higashi Honganji *bonsho* bell, underneath which sits a five-foot-tall ice sculpture of Buddha, lit by a candle placed at his feet. As the dishes come and go in dizzying array, the Buddha drips, until his famous belly has melted away. (Open daily for dinner. Entrées $15-$180.)

—*Andrea Thompson*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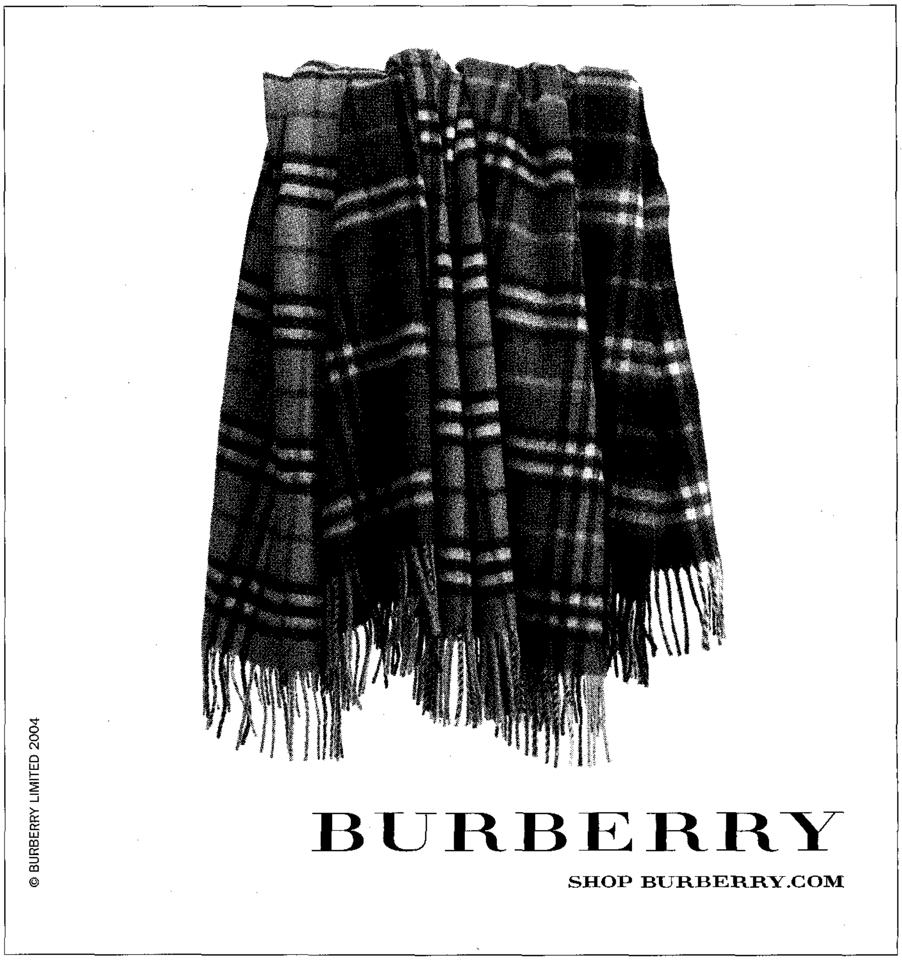


MOVIES OPENING

THE AVIATOR
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 17.

BEYOND THE SEA
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 17.

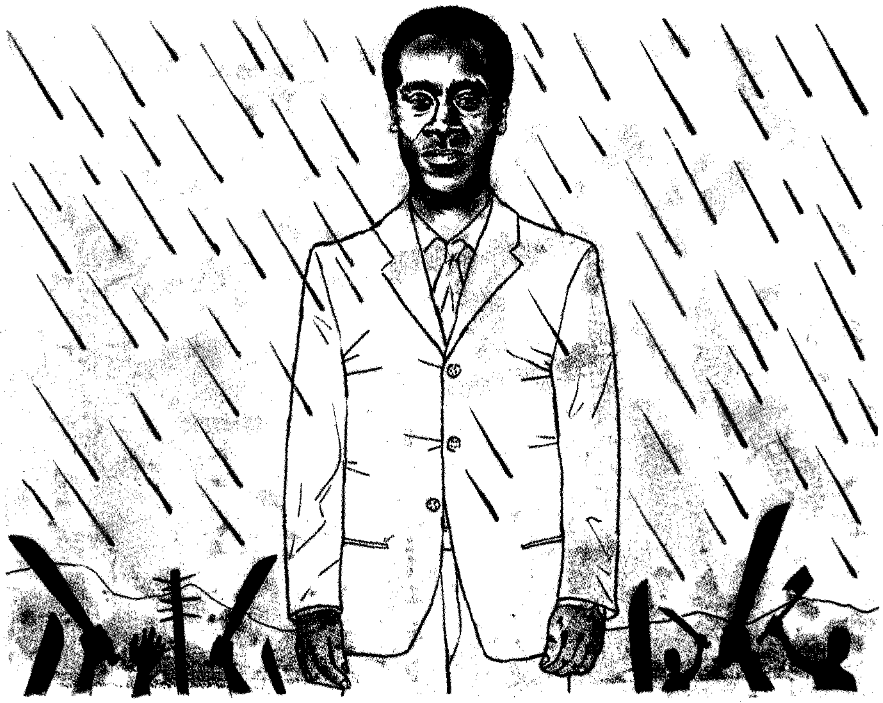
DARKNESS
A haunted-house film set in Barcelona and directed by Jaume Balagueró. With Anna Paquin and Lena Olin. Opening Dec. 25.

FAT ALBERT
The characters from the seventies cartoon show turn up in the present, in a live-action comedy directed by Joel Zwick and co-written by Bill Cosby. With Kenan Thompson as Albert and Jermaine Williams as Mushmouth. Opening Dec. 25.

FLIGHT OF THE PHOENIX
John Moore directed this remake of the 1965 thriller about the survivors of a plane crash in the Gobi Desert. With Dennis Quaid, Tyrese Gibson, Hugh Laurie, Miranda Otto, and Giovanni Ribisi. Opening Dec. 17.

HOTEL RWANDA
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 22.

IMAGINARY HEROES
The début drama from the writer-director Dan Harris chronicles a year in the life of a dysfunctional suburban upper-middle-class family. With Sigourney Weaver, Jeff Daniels, Emile Hirsch, and Michelle Williams. Opening Dec. 17. (Angelika Film Center.)



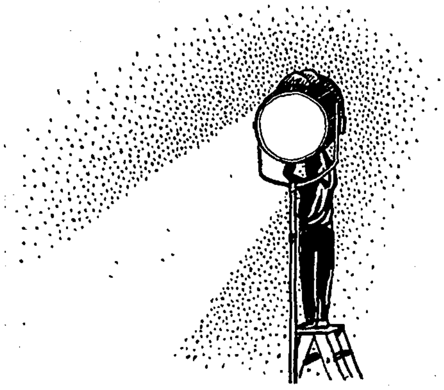
Don Cheadle in Terry George's "Hotel Rwanda," opening Dec. 22.

IN THE REALMS OF THE UNREAL
Jessica Yu's documentary about Henry Darger, the Chicago janitor, recluse, painter, and novelist. Opening Dec. 22. (Film Forum.)

THE KEYS TO THE HOUSE
An Italian father (Kim Rossi Stuart) accompanies his disabled son to a Berlin hospital, in a road movie directed by Gianni Amelio. With Charlotte Rampling. In Italian. Opening Dec. 22.

LEMONY SNICKET'S A SERIES OF UNFORTUNATE EVENTS
Jude Law narrates this adaptation of the children's book, in which Count Olaf (Jim Carrey) has designs upon the inheritance of the Baudelaire children. With Meryl Streep as Aunt Josephine and Billy Connolly as Uncle Monty. Directed by Brad Silberling. Opening Dec. 17.

MEET THE FOCKERS
In this sequel to "Meet the Parents," Greg Focker (Ben Stiller) introduces his fiancée (Teri Polo) to his mother (Barbra Streisand) and father (Dustin Hoffman). Also with Robert De Niro and Blythe Danner. Directed by Jay Roach. Opening Dec. 22.



MILLION DOLLAR BABY
Reviewed this week in The Current Cinema. Opening Dec. 15.

THE PHANTOM OF THE OPERA
Joel Schumacher adapts Andrew Lloyd Webber's stage musical, with Gerard Butler in the title role. Also with Emmy Rossum, Miranda Richardson, Minnie Driver, and Patrick Wilson. Opening Dec. 22.

THE SEA INSIDE
Reviewed below in Film Notes. Opening Dec. 17.

SPANGLISH
James L. Brooks wrote and directed this comedic drama about a Mexican woman (Paz Vega) who finds work in the L.A. household of a celebrity chef (Adam Sandler) and his wife (Téa Leoni). Opening Dec. 17.

THE WOODSMAN
A convicted sex offender (Kevin Bacon) tries to start anew, in a drama directed by Nicole Kassell. With Kyra Sedgwick, Mos Def, and Benjamin Bratt. Opening Dec. 24. (Sunshine Cinema.)

FILM NOTES

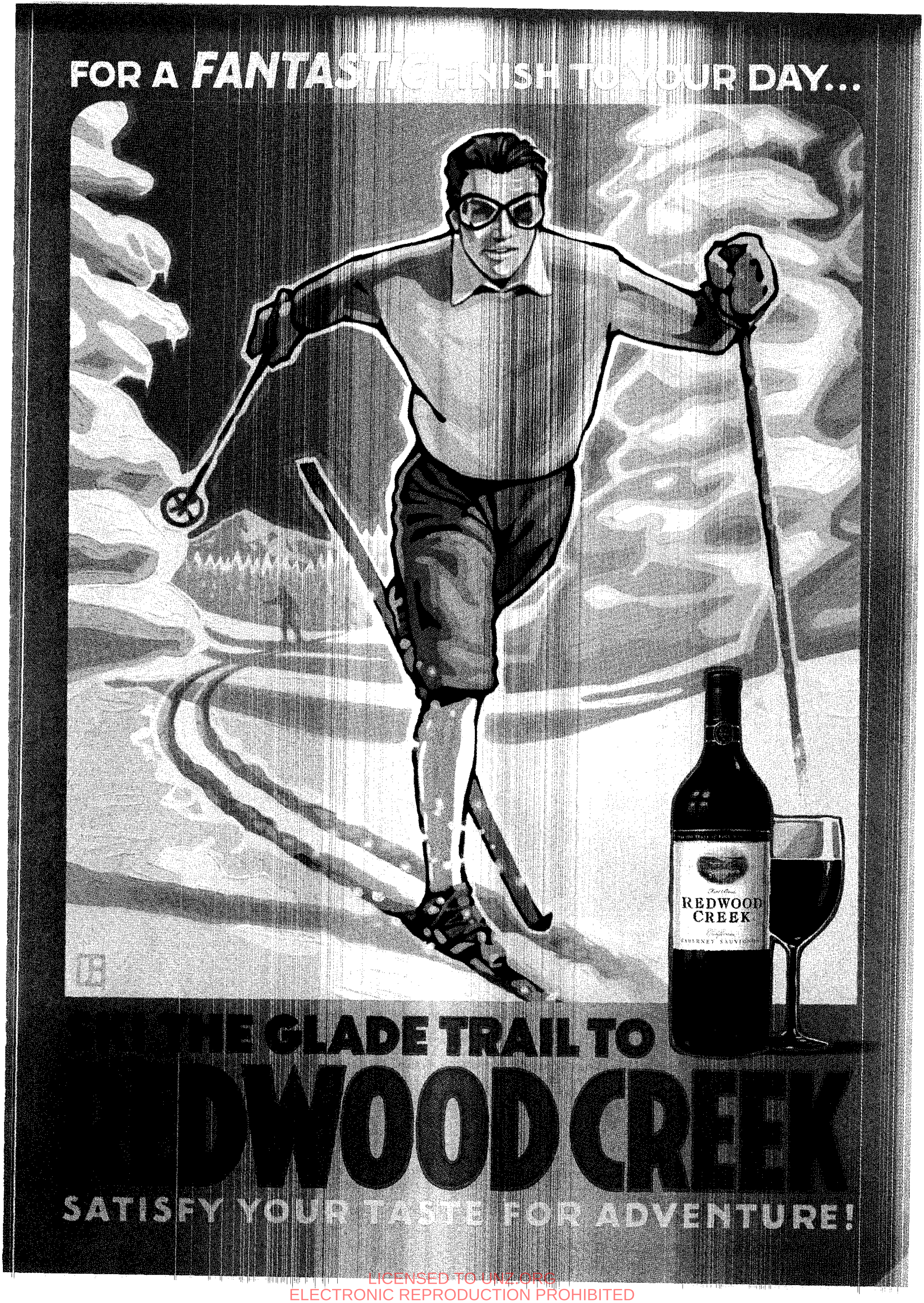
ALEXANDER
Beware the long-cherished project. That is one of the lessons handed down by Oliver Stone's bio-pic of Alexander the Great, upon which the director has ruminated for many years. Somebody less obsessed by the undertaking might have given us less to laugh about; as things stand, we gaze at Colin Farrell, in the leading role, and wonder if Alexander was impelled to reach the limits of the known world purely in order to forget the tragedy of his wig. Farrell looks deeply grieved in his part, as does Jared Leto, who has the unhappy task of portraying Hephaistion, the general's abiding lover. The story, narrated by the aged Ptolemy (Anthony Hopkins) and unfolding in flashback, takes us from a princely boyhood in Macedonia, under the raging rule of Val Kilmer, to the rout of Darius at Gaugamela in 331 B.C. (clearly the heart of the picture, with a wild beat), and so on, eastward, all the way to an elephant-infested India. Many viewers will find nearly three hours of plotless history, alternately savage and sluggish, a little hard to stomach, and they will turn with relief to those performers who treat the whole enterprise as the highest form of kitsch—Angelina Jolie, as Alexander's mother, and Rosario Dawson, as his wife. When these two are onscreen, all thoughts of Homeric heroism are flung aside, and we can settle down to enjoy the movie for what it is: the "Showgirls" of the ancient world.—*Anthony Lane* (Reviewed in our issue of 12/6/04.) (Battery Park 11, Cinema 1, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Village East Cinemas.)

BAD EDUCATION
In an obscure parochial school in rural Spain, two young boys, Ignacio and Enrique, fell in love. But the boys were only eleven, and the affair was broken up by a priest and schoolmaster named Manolo. The priest, however, wasn't simply enforcing the rules. Father Manolo had already laid hands on Ignacio, and he wanted him entirely for himself. Pedro Almodóvar's extraordinary new movie, which is both a summary of his career and a deepening of his recent style, opens sixteen years after the affair, in 1980. Ignacio (Gael García Bernal), now a young actor, brings a manuscript to Enrique (Fele Martínez), who has become a well-known movie director in Madrid. The manuscript chronicles the boys' friendship and what happened to Ignacio—he became a drag queen and a blackmailer. We see the story enacted; later, Enrique turns it into a movie, and we see that being filmed, too, at which point the priest, now an ex-priest, shows up, and we hear his version of the events. The truth of what happened to the grownup Ignacio and Enrique emerges in pieces: the three narratives, as they expand and correct one another, become a trio of mirrors producing endless off-angle reflections. The movie asks: Is love possible between men, or is it possible only between innocent boys? In Spanish.—*David Denby* (11/22/04) (Chelsea Cinemas, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sunshine Cinema.)

BEYOND THE SEA
Kevin Spacey's wide-screen cinematic treatment of the fifties pop idol Bobby Darin is an exuberant but convoluted love letter. Taking his cues from Bob Fosse's "All That Jazz," Spacey creates a musical biography that's part fantasy (in the singing sequences) and part reality, but the movie never really jells. There's no getting around the fact that Spacey, at forty-five, can't play a baby-faced pop star, and the scenes of Darin's early years with his wife Sandra Dee (a pouty Kate Bosworth) don't come off. Still, there's a real razzle-dazzle to the movie, and the musical numbers, which are brilliantly arranged by John Wilson and sung by Spacey himself, turn out to be greatly entertaining.—*Bruce Diones* (Angelika Film Center, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, and 19th Street East 6.)

CLOSER
Patrick Marber has adapted his own hit play, of the same name, and given the lucky director, Mike Nichols, a script that he can chew on. Some viewers, or listeners, may flinch at the profanity here, or at the level of honesty that demands such profane expression, but peel away the carnal talk and what you are left with—the bone structure of the piece—is not so different from that of Noël Coward's "Private Lives." We get two interlocking couples: Dan

EDEL RODRIGUEZ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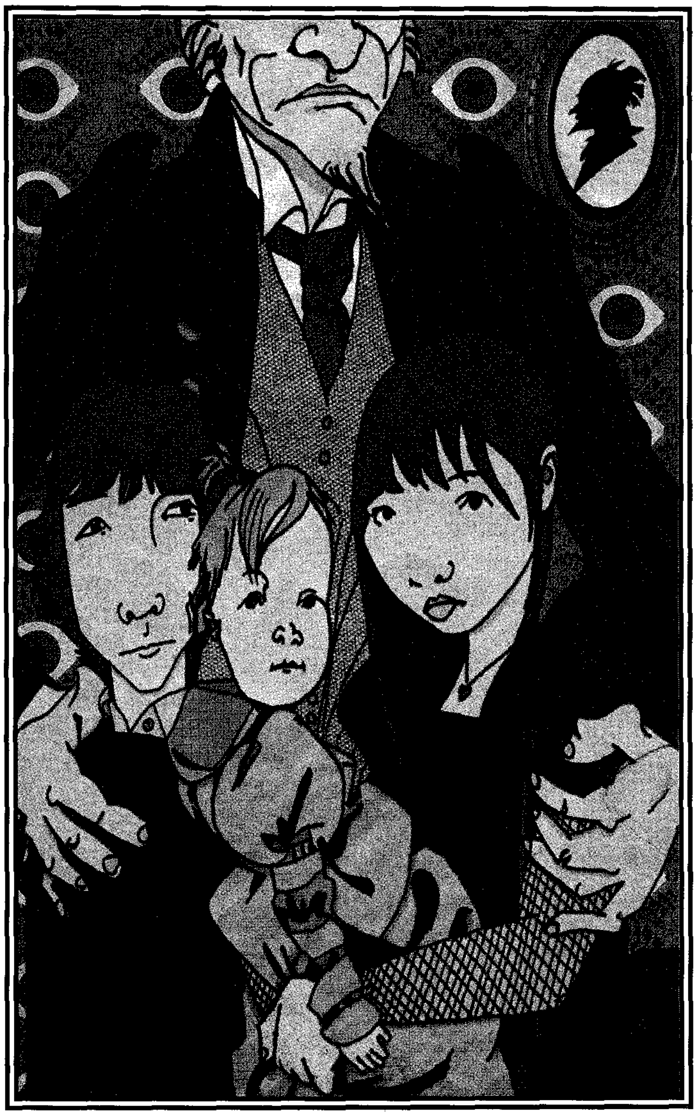
(Jude Law), a writer who falls in love with Alice (Natalie Portman), a night-club stripper, and Larry (Clive Owen), a doctor who marries a photographer called Anna (Julia Roberts). The transactions are quick and brutal: Dan has anonymous online sex with Larry and a yearlong affair with Anna, Alice leaves Dan and finds work at a club, Larry finds her there and tells her precisely what he wants, and nobody is happy. The film is more civilized than the play, the acid slightly diluted, and Law, for one, looks eaten away by the bitter pace of it all. Roberts, too, is haunted and pained, whereas Portman and Owen drink and spit their lines with undiminished relish, often at speeds that Nichols can barely handle. Not recommended for couples on a first date.—*A.L.* (12/13/04) (Battery Park 11, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, 19th Street East 6, 64th and 2nd, and Village Theatre VII.)

DAYS OF BEING WILD

The second film by the director Wong Kar-wai, and the first in which he displayed the signature traits that continue to fascinate and annoy—the predilection for loosely interconnected scenes of elliptical conversation, the obsession with rainfall, and the intuitive gift for isolating the moments when his actors drop their masks, revealing elation, longing, and ennui. This 1991 movie is about a love triangle, with a playboy (the late Leslie Cheung) altering the geometries. It's often slow, almost languid, but unforgettable. With Maggie Cheung, Andy Lau, and Carina Lau. In Cantonese.—*Michael Agger* (Film Forum.)

FINDING NEVERLAND

Marc Forster, the director who brought us "Monster's Ball," has turned his attention—as one does—from Halle Berry to J. M. Barrie. The diminutive Scottish author is played by Johnny Depp, in a loose fantasia on the genesis of "Peter Pan." Barrie meets some young boys in a London park, and from his friendship with them and their widowed mother (Kate Winslet) he conjures a story of a child who cannot, or will not, grow up. The fact that the film takes liberties with the historical record (there were five brothers, for instance, not four) is a minor affair; more misguided is the reliance on whimsy, at moments where the real Barrie was straightforward, even chilly, in his imaginings. At other times, however, the movie's air of slightness and evanescence feels touching and right, and, if the result strikes you as too weepy for its own good, consider that the actual story of Barrie and his "Lost Boys"—some of whom met untimely deaths—was worse and more troubling by far. With Julie Christie, Dustin Hoffman, and, in the role of a real Peter, the clear and unsentimental Freddie Highmore.—*A.L.* (Battery Park 11, Cinema 1, East 86th Street Cinemas, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, and Village Theatre VII.)



"Lemony Snicket's A Series of Unfortunate Events" opens Dec. 17.

JASHAR AWAN

HOUSE OF FLYING DAGGERS

Not a sequel to "Hero," the fantastical hit of the summer, but a chance for the same director, Zhang Yimou, to paint the screen red with his luscious and newly invigorated style. In the middle of the ninth century, two regional policemen (Andy Lau and Takeshi Kaneshiro) take on the might of the Flying Daggers, a furtive antigovernment organization. Their first break is to arrest Mei (Ziyi Zhang), a blind dancer who has all sorts of tricks up her sleeves, most of them liable to cut your throat. One cop goes undercover, hoping that Mei can be seduced into revealing the villains' lair. There is an unembarrassed scent of melodrama to all this, as if Zhang's plot had been infected by the excess of his violent ballets—the knives, arrows, kicks, and leaps with which every contest is resolved, and by which the characters demonstrate their respect for one another and their scorn for the laws of physics. At some point, though, the poise falters, and the movie, unlike "Hero," tips into silliness; in the lust to register nothing but beautiful patterns of movement, the claims of logic, political fear, and even love are blithely blown away. In Mandarin.—*A.L.* (12/13/04) (Chelsea Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, 72nd Street East, and Union Square.)

THE INCREDIBLES

A shiny new project from Pixar, sprinting in the footsteps of "Toy Story." Bob and Helen Parr are retired superheroes, raising their suspiciously gifted children in the suburbs. Bob, stuck in an office job, is lured back into the fray; being a lunk, he stumbles into a trap, and Helen, being a wife, has the guts and initiative to set out and rescue him. The movie, written and directed by Brad Bird, is a smart compound of shameless visual exaggeration (Bob's muscle tone alone is a special effect) and a touchingly unhip reliance on emotional realism. Instead of giggling references to other movies, we get snatches of ordinary family bickering, plus a distinct air of nineteen-fifties innocence—quite a fillip, given that many computer-animated movies pride themselves on technological progress and nothing else. The main voice-overs are delivered by Craig T. Nelson, Samuel L. Jackson, and—most winning of all—Holly Hunter.—*A.L.* (11/15/04) (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Square, New York Twin, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

KINSEY

Liam Neeson, his hair standing straight up like tensed wire, is the dauntless but neurotic sex researcher Alfred C. Kinsey in this vivacious and witty—even naughty—bio-pic, written and directed by Bill Condon. The movie covers Kinsey's entire adult life (with flashbacks to his boyhood), including his marriage to Clara McMillen (Laura Linney) and his relations with the much younger men—Clyde Martin (Peter Sarsgaard), Wardell Pomeroy (Chris O'Donnell), and Paul Gebhardt (Timothy Hutton)—who became, at Indiana University in the forties and fifties, the principal assistants on Kinsey's revolutionary books about male and female sexuality. At the movie's heart is a surprisingly entertaining sequence devoted to the team's interviewing technique, a method of nonjudgmental inquiry that causes hundreds of thousands of subjects to open up and confess, with the result that behavior that had been isolated in the past as "deviant" or "perverted" came to seem like relatively common occurrences on the spectrum of human sexuality. Eager to sympathize and understand everyone, Kinsey the liberator plunges into gay bars, homosexual relationships, and once-a-philosopher-twice-a-pervert masochistic practices. Condon presents him as a genuine hero who drove himself into semi-madness and exhaustion, a sacrificial figure who died for our pleasure.—*D.D.* (11/29/04) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Chelsea Cinemas, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Sunshine Cinema.)

NIGHT AND THE CITY

Several years before he made "Rififi," Jules Dassin directed this less flamboyant thriller, which is much less well known but in some ways better. Dassin's shocking specialty—a kind of stifled violence that one fears will explode—finds the right milieu in the Gerald Kersh novel, a complex view of the underside of London entertainment. An Anglo-American cast is headed by Richard Widmark, who has possibly his best role as Harry Fabian, "the artist without an art," a tout with a creative passion for fantastic, shady schemes. Released in 1950.—*Pauline Kael* (Film Forum; Dec. 23.)

OCEAN'S TWELVE

Let us (why not?) borrow a trope from Leon Trotsky: "Every man has a right to be stupid on occasion, but Comrade Soderbergh abuses the privilege." This mock caper movie jerks along in the same incoherent style as Steven Soderbergh's 2002 "Full Frontal," which was a mock art movie. Soderbergh and the producer Jerry Weintraub jammed a script by George Nolfi called "Honor Among Thieves" into the "Ocean's Eleven" formula, and the result is a sequel devoted to an insultingly silly premise: Andy Garcia, the Vegas casino owner whom the team ripped off in the first movie, wants his money back, so the boys have to steal other people's money in order to repay him; they then get into a competition with the greatest thief in Europe to lift a Fabergé egg from a Roman museum. Much narrative repetition and dishevelment follow, underlined by inept "spontaneous" camera work. The actors run numbers on each other's heads and hang out at George Clooney's actual villa on Lake Como; Bruce Willis shows up, trying to pretend he's in on the joke, and smirks his way through several awkward scenes. Soderbergh

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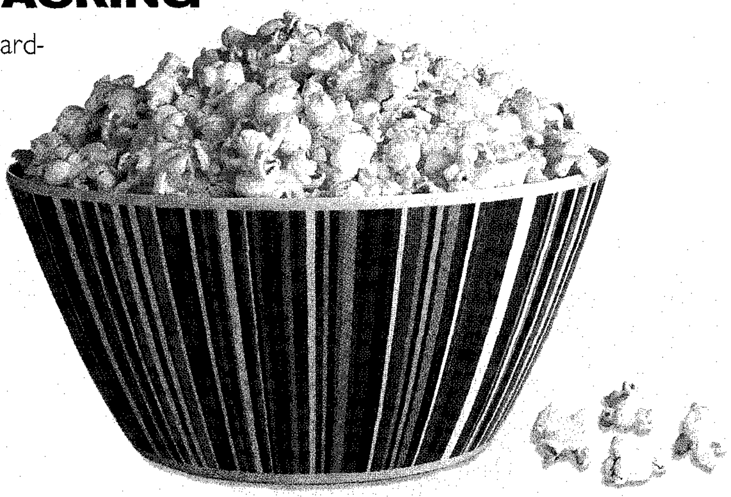

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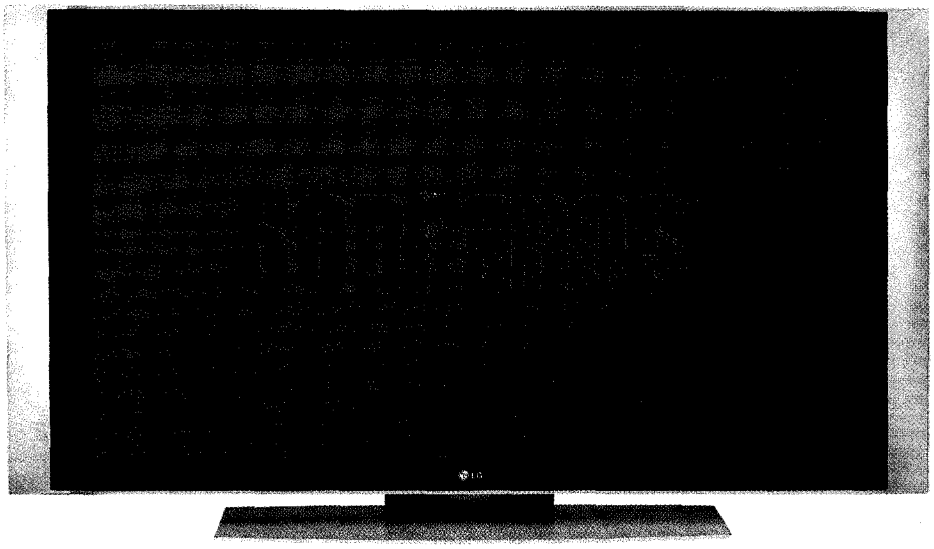

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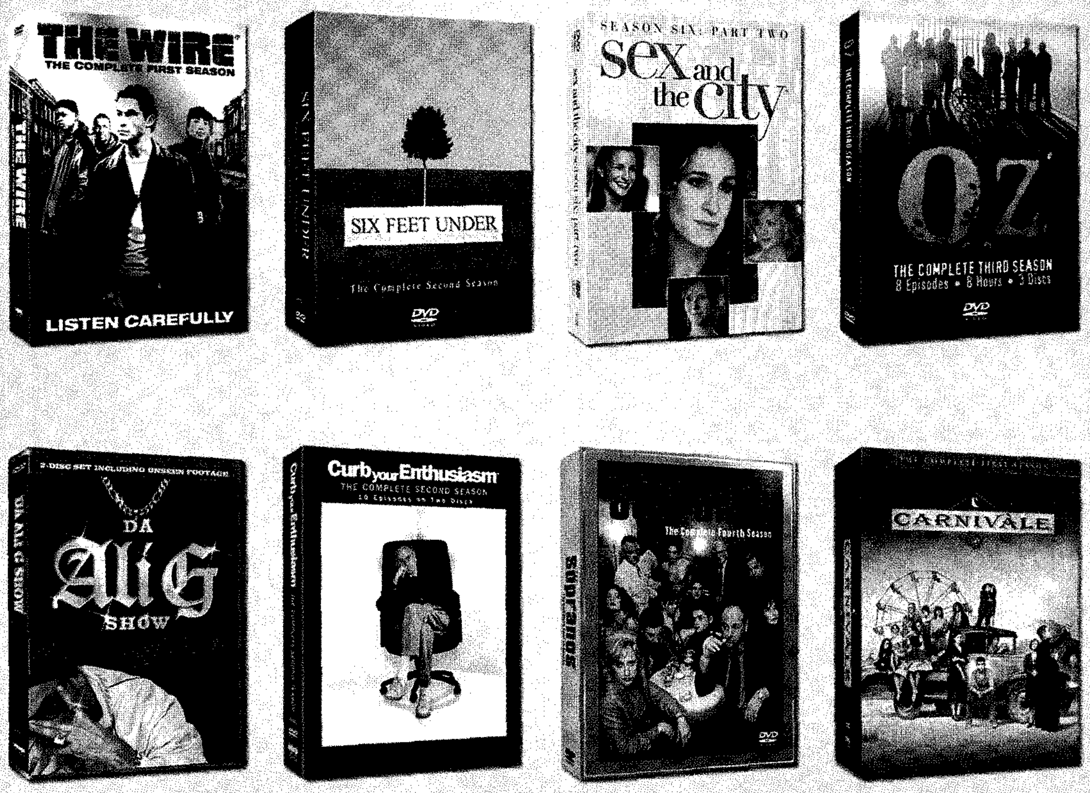
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and the rest may be embarrassed by the artificiality of caper movies, but their way of expressing their uneasiness frustrates the audience's desire to enter into a harmless fantasy. In the end, everyone in the movie has fun except the people watching it. With the French star Vincent Cassell, who, evading some laser beams, does a cross between gymnastics and Tai Chi Chuan, and, in general, performs with professional skill.—*D.D.* (Battery Park 11, 84th Street Sixplex, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, 19th Street East 6, Orpheum VII, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, and Village Theatre VII.)

THE POLAR EXPRESS

Chris Van Allsburg's twenty-nine-page picture book about a young boy's travels to the North Pole to meet Santa Claus gets an expanded, expensive retelling in Robert Zemeckis's Christmas bauble. The film is a hybrid of sorts—a computer-animated movie filmed with live actors in a process called "performance capture." This technique makes for a gorgeous holiday card (the digital backgrounds twinkle and shine), but the look of the "captured" characters is something of a disappointment. Tom Hanks (in a number of roles) and the other actors do a nice job of voicing their parts, but the waxy animated faces they've been given are off-putting. It's a bit like watching mannequins act. (The movie is also playing in 3-D at selected IMAX theaters, where the wow quotient improves considerably.)—*B.D.* (Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, East 86th Street Cinemas, 84th Street Sixplex, Empire 25, Kips Bay Theatre, 64th and 2nd, 34th Street Theatre, Union Square, and Ziegfeld.)

RAY

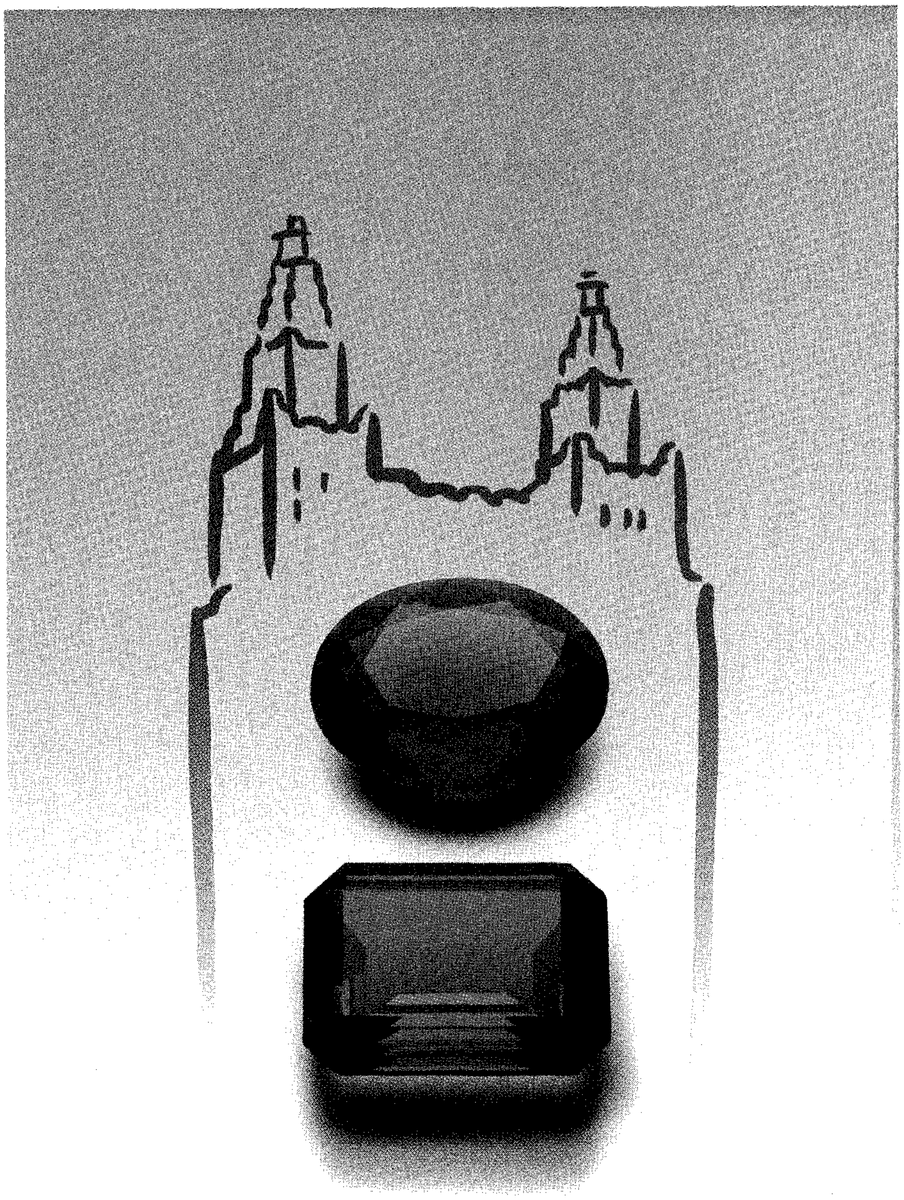
Swaying from side to side, his back arched almost to the point of snapping, Jamie Foxx, as Ray Charles, seems pulled upward to the heavens and downward to the keys at the same time. This intelligent and tough-minded bio-pic, written by James L. White and Taylor Hackford and directed by Hackford, tells us a lot about Charles, but it doesn't tell us everything. Though properly awed by Charles's talent, "Ray" refuses to get chummy or possessive. The movie picks up Charles's story in the late forties, when he's an ambitious but wary teen-age musician, and carries him through his musical innovations and his personal pleasures and torments until 1964, when he's a world-famous artist and a miserable heroin addict. There's something both joyous and demonic about this guy, an insatiable energy in his insistence on driving soul and country sounds into the beats of R. & B. For many older people in the audience, the sound of Ray Charles's music is inseparable from memories of dating, dancing, lovemaking, and loss. The movie has the bold good grace to honor the enraptured kids they once were and the sterner but still hungry grownups they became.—*D.D.* (11/8/04) (Battery Park 11, Chelsea West, 84th Street Sixplex, First & 62nd Cinemas, 42nd Street E Walk, Kips Bay Theatre, Orpheum VII, 34th Street Theatre, and Union Square.)

THE SEA INSIDE

The director Alejandro Amenábar's follow-up to his big American hit ("The Others") is a Spanish-language film—the true-life story of Ramón Sampedro, a quadriplegic who led a campaign in favor of his right to die. As Sampedro, Javier Bardem gives a small miracle of a performance. Confined to his bed, unable to move, Bardem has an uncanny ability to express mystery and resilience. The movie centers on Sampedro's loving family and the two women who try to change his life (one supports his euthanasia, the other doesn't). The dialogue is, at times, poetic, and there's a moving, somnambulistic feel to the film—it slowly drifts asleep.—*B.D.* (Chelsea Cinemas, First & 62nd Cinemas, Lincoln Square, and Sunshine Cinema.)

SIDEWAYS

Paul Giamatti has no chin to speak of, a round-shouldered physique, and the nervous smile of a craven dog. He's the anti-ideal of the American male, and he's making a brilliant career of it. In this wonderful movie by the team of Alexander Payne (writer-director) and Jim Taylor (co-writer), Giamatti plays Miles, a failed novelist around forty



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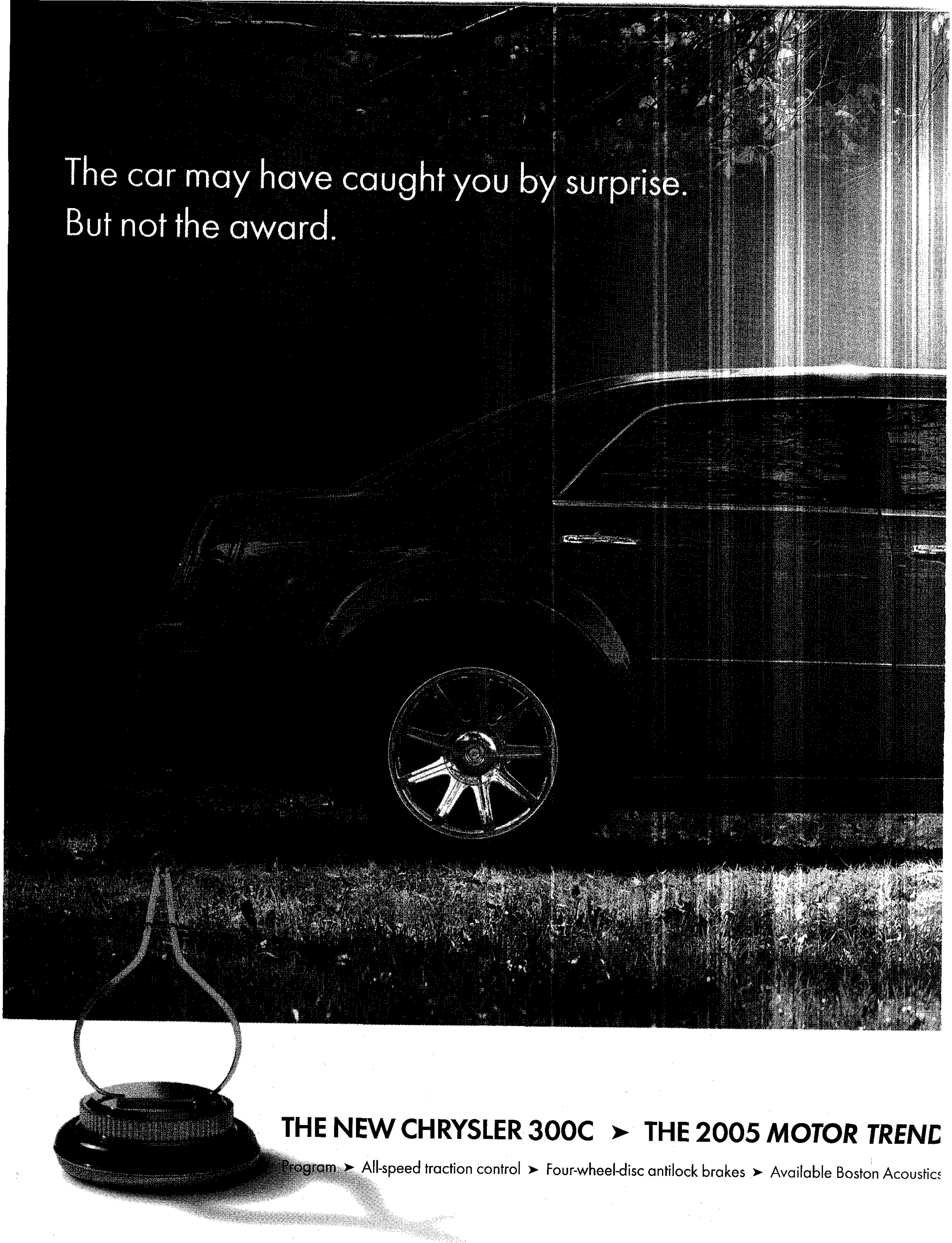
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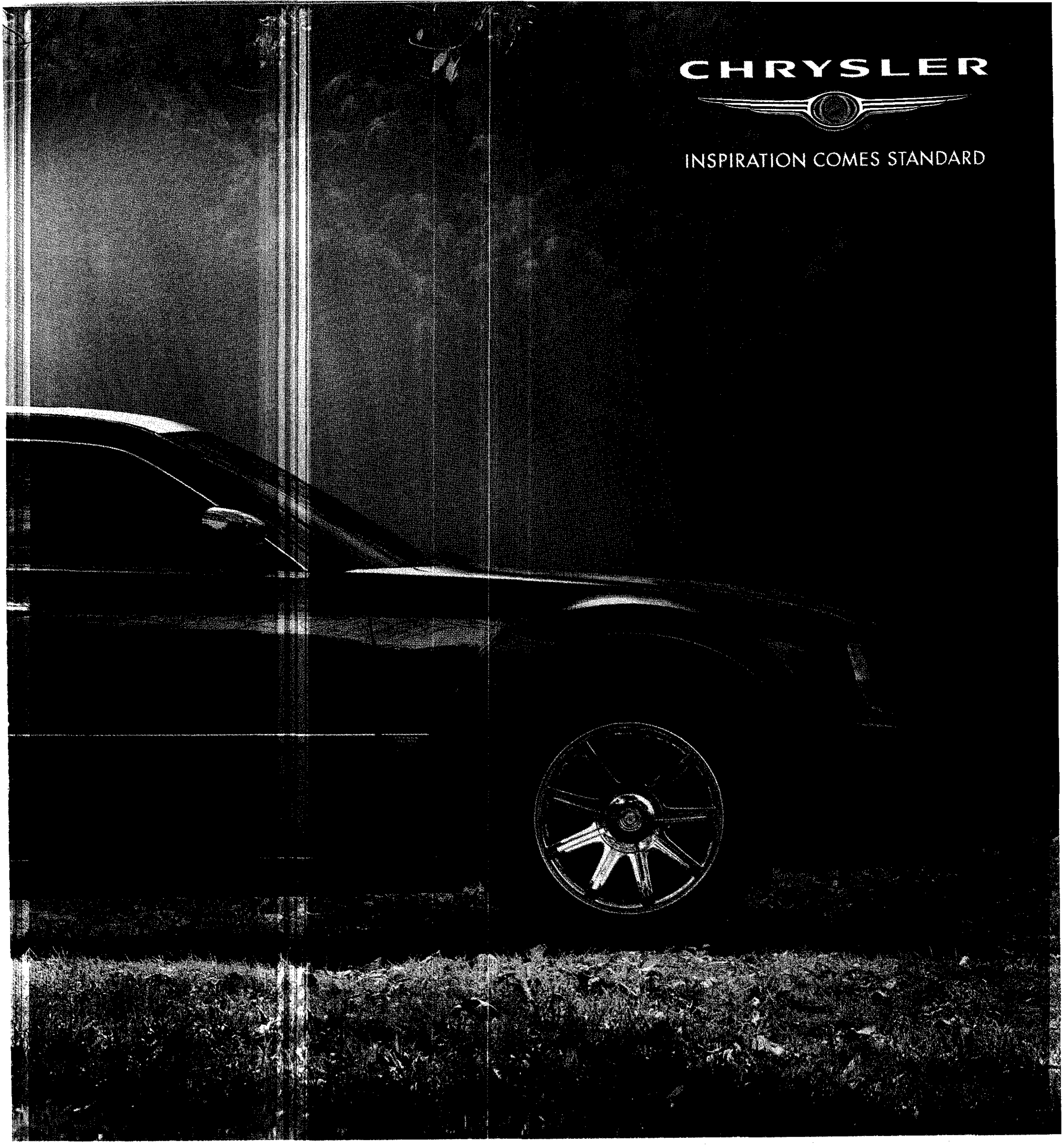

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who takes off for a wine-tasting tour with his buddy Jack (Thomas Haden Church), a washed-up TV actor who is about to get married. What starts as a last fling at freedom becomes for the two men—but centrally for Miles—a confrontation with middle age and stasis. Miles is a bibliophile, a cinephile, and an oenophile. Jack, however, couldn't care less—in every way, he's blissfully undiscriminating. On the road, the men meet Maya (Virginia Madsen), a divorced graduate student who works as a waitress, and Stephanie (Sandra Oh), a sexy "pour girl." The music and the camera setups are at times pedestrian, but the rest of "Sideways" is vivid and bitterly funny.—*D.D.* (10/25/04) (BAM Rose Cinemas, Battery Park 11, Chelsea Cinemas, East 85th Street, Empire 25, First & 62nd Cinemas, Kips Bay Theatre, Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, and Union Square.)

THIEVES' HIGHWAY
Jules Dassin's pulsating 1949 trucker movie about a Second World War veteran (Richard Conte) who challenges the corruption of San Francisco's produce marketplace has an elemental force different from the intricate pulp poetry of the director's London-set "Night and the City" (1950) and Paris-set "Rififi" (1954). The Italian actress Valentina Cortesa was an out-of-left-field choice to play the waterfront whore who becomes the hero's ally, but she's phenomenal in the role—playful, turbulent, and sensual, and blazingly honest when it counts. Hired by the crooked fruit-and-vegetable dealer Lee J. Cobb to distract Conte, she instead falls in love with him, and awakens him to the stirrings of his own authentic self. Conte, with his wounded eyes, and Cortesa, with her fervid ones, make a combustible team. They explode the parameters of social melodrama and film noir, and turn this exposé into a steamy existential romance.—*Michael Sragow* (Film Forum; Dec. 23.)

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THEATRE ADDRESSES

Unless noted, call 212-777-FILM for show times.

Angelika Film Center, 18 W. Houston St.
BAM Rose Cinemas, 30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn.
Battery Park 11, West St. at Vesey St.
Beekman, Second Ave. at 66th St.
Chelsea Cinemas, 260 W. 23rd St.
Chelsea West, 333 W. 23rd St.
Cinemas 1, 2, and 3, Third Ave. at 60th St.
Cinema Village, 22 E. 12th St. (212-924-3363).
East 86th Street Cinemas, Third Ave. at 86th St.
84th Street Sixplex, Broadway at 84th St.
Empire 25, on 42nd St. near Eighth Ave. (212-398-3939).
59th Street East Cinema, 239 E. 59th St.
Film Forum, W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110).
First & 62nd Cinemas, 400 E. 62nd St.
42nd Street E Walk, 42nd St. near Eighth Ave.
Kips Bay Theatre, Second Ave. at 32nd St.
Lincoln Plaza Cinemas, Broadway at 63rd St. (212-757-2280).
Lincoln Square, Broadway at 68th St.
New York Twin, Second Ave. at 66th St.
19th Street East 6, Broadway at 19th St.
Orpheum VII, Third Ave. at 86th St.
Paris, 4 W. 58th St. (212-688-3800).
Pioneer Theatre, 155 E. 3rd St. (212-254-3300).
Quad Cinema, 34 W. 13th St.
72nd Street East, Third Ave. at 71st St.
64th and 2nd, Second Ave. at 64th St.
62nd & Broadway, 62 W. 62nd St.
Sunshine Cinema, 143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182).
Sutton 1 and 2, Third Ave. at 57th St.
34th Street Theatre, 312 W. 34th St.
Union Square, Broadway at 13th St.
Village East Cinemas, Second Ave. at 12th St.
Village Theatre VII, Third Ave. at 11th St.
Ziegfeld, 141 W. 54th St.

REVIVALS, CLASSICS, ETC.

Titles with a dagger are reviewed above.

AMERICAN MUSEUM OF THE MOVING IMAGE
35th Ave. at 36th St., Astoria (718-784-0077)—A "Made in Queens" matinée. Dec. 15 at 10:30 A.M.: "Radio Days" (1987, Woody Allen). ♦ Martial-arts classics. Dec. 17 at 7:30: "Warriors of Heaven and Earth" (2004, Ping He). ♦ Through Jan. 2: Preston Sturges films. Dec. 18 at 2: "The Great McGinty" (1940). ♦ Dec. 18 at 4 and Dec. 19 at 2: "Sullivan's Travels" (1941). ♦ Dec. 19 at 4: "Christmas in July" (1940). ♦ Dec. 26 at 2: "The Palm Beach Story" (1942). ♦ Dec. 26 at 4: "The Lady Eve" (1941). ♦ Repertory nights. Dec. 18-19 at 6:30: "The Birds" (1963, Alfred Hitchcock). ♦ Dec. 26 at 6:30: "Il Posto" (1961, Ermanno Olmi; in Italian).

ANTHOLOGY FILM ARCHIVES
32 Second Ave., at 2nd St. (212-505-5110)—*The Onion* presents. Dec. 16 at 7 and 9:30: "Office Space" (1999, Mike Judge). ♦ Dec. 17 at 7:30 and 9:30: The Annual Joseph Cornell Christmas Special. ♦ Special screenings. Dec. 18 at 6: "Burning Universe" (2001-04, Angel Orensanz). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8:30: Short films by Abraham Ravett. ♦ Dec. 19 at 4: "As I Was Moving Ahead Occasionally I Saw Brief Glimpses of Beauty" (2000, Jonas Mekas). ♦ Dec. 18-19: Big Apple Film Festival. ♦ Closed until Jan. 5.

BAM ROSE CINEMAS
30 Lafayette Ave., Brooklyn (718-777-3456)—Dec. 15 at 4:30, 6:50, and 9:15: "Mercano the Martian" (2002, Juan Antin; in Spanish). ♦ Dec. 16 at 7:30: "Ossessione" (1942, Luchino Visconti; in Italian). ♦ The repertory program continues in February.

FILM FORUM
W. Houston St. west of Sixth Ave. (212-727-8110)—Through Dec. 23: "Essential Noir." Dec. 15-16 at 1, 4:40, and 8:20: "The Woman in the Window" (1944, Fritz Lang). ♦ Dec. 15-16 at 2:55, 6:35, and 10:15: "The Big Heat" (1953, Lang). ♦ Dec. 17-18 at 1:35, 5:25, and 9:15: "Sweet Smell of Success" (1957, Alexander Mackendrick). ♦ Dec. 17-18 at 3:20 and 7:10: "Touch of Evil" (1958, Orson Welles). ♦ Dec. 19-20 at 1:20, 5:20, and 9:20: "Shadow of a Doubt" (1943, Alfred Hitchcock). ♦ Dec. 19-20 at 3:25 and 7:25: "Out of the Past" (1947, Jacques Tourneur). ♦ Dec. 21-22 at 1:30, 5:30, and 9:30: "Kiss Me Deadly" (1955, Robert Aldrich). ♦ Dec. 21-22 at 3:30 and 7:30: "Strangers on a Train" (1951, Hitchcock). ♦ Dec. 23 at 1:30, 5:20, and 9:10: "Night and the City" (†). ♦ Dec. 23 at 3:30 and 7:20: "Thieves' Highway" (†). ♦ Special screening. Dec. 24-28 at 1:30, 3:30, 5:30, 7:30, and 9:30: "Donkey Skin" (1970, Jacques Demy; in French).

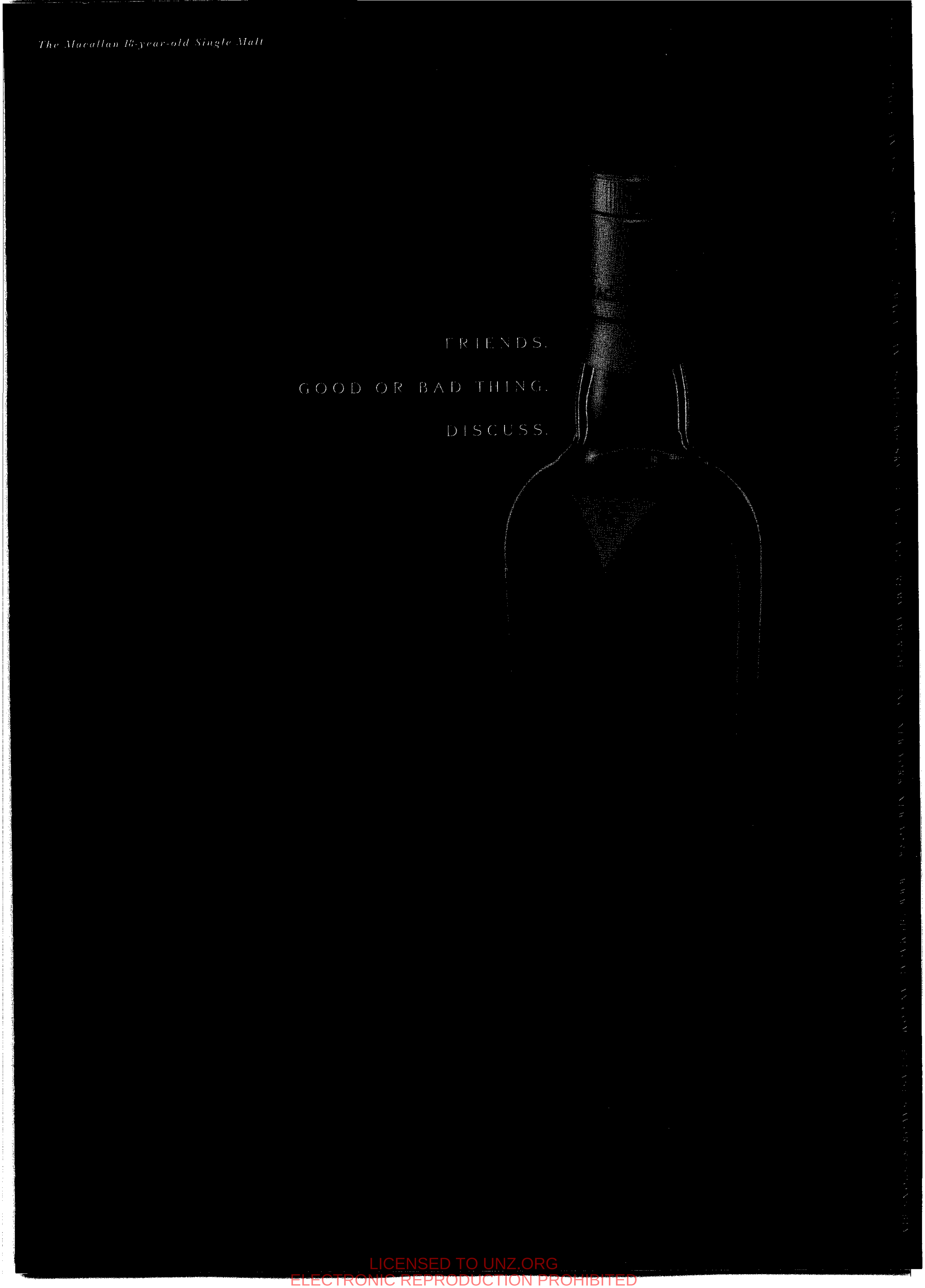
FLORENCE GOULD HALL
55 E. 59th St. (212-355-6160)—Through Dec. 21: "Sisters: Dorléac and Deneuve." Dec. 21 at 12:30, 3:30, 6:30, and 9: "I'm Going Home" (2001, Manoel de Oliveira; in French).

MUSEUM OF MODERN ART
Roy and Niuta Titus Theatres, 11 W. 53rd St. (212-708-9480)—Through Jan. 31: "Premières," new films and recent restorations. Dec. 15 at 8:15 and 8:30: "Hotel Rwanda" (2004, Terry George). ♦ Dec. 16 at 5 and Dec. 18 at 3: "Strangers When We Meet" (1960, Richard Quine). ♦ Dec. 16 at 7:30: "Reservoir Dogs" (1992, Quentin Tarantino), introduced by Bob Weinstein, Harvey Weinstein, and the director. ♦ Dec. 17 at 5 and Dec. 18 at 5:30: "Kings of the Sky" (2004, Deborah Stratman). ♦ Dec. 17 at 6:15 and Dec. 20 at 5: "The Best of British Television Commercials 2004." ♦ Dec. 17 at 8:30 and Dec. 26 at 2: "The Floorwalker" (1916, Charles Chaplin), "The Cure" (1917, Chaplin), and "Tillie's Punctured Romance" (1914, Mack Sennett). ♦ Dec. 18 at 2:30: Nine short films by graduates of eight German film schools. ♦ Dec. 18 at 7: "Come and Go" (2003, João César Monteiro; in Portuguese). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: "High Hill" (2003, Choiha Dongha; in Korean). ♦ Dec. 19 at 2 and Dec. 22 at 6: "Pourquoi (Pas) le Brésil" (2004, Laetitia Masson). ♦ Dec. 19 at 2:30 and Dec. 23 at 8:30: "The Uncles" (2004, Tacita Dean). ♦ Dec. 19 at 5:30: "Rêve de Cheval" (2004, Ariane Michel) and four other shorts. ♦ Dec. 20 at 6:15 and Dec. 22 at 8:15: "Head-On" (2004, Fatih Akin). ♦ Dec. 20 at 8:30: Films by Nancy Andrews (2003-04). ♦ Dec. 20 at 8:45: "The St. Petersburg Diary, Kozintsev's Flat" (1988, Alexander Sokurov; in Russian). ♦ Dec. 22 at 5: "SuperCell" (2004, George Kuchar) and "The Meaning of the Buffalo" (2004, Karin Slater). ♦ Dec. 22 at 8: "A Sjtetl That Doesn't Exist Anymore" (2004, Heddy Honigmann) and "Confliction/Homeland" (2004, Mike Jarmon). ♦ Dec. 23 at 6:15 and Dec. 24 at 5:30: "Summer Storm" (2004, Marco Kreuzpaintner). ♦ Dec. 23 at 8:30 and Dec. 27 at 6:15: "Niceland" (2004, Fridrik Thor Fridriksson). ♦ Dec. 26 at 5: "Where the Sidewalk Ends" (1950, Otto Preminger). ♦ Dec. 26 at 5:30: "Wireless Telegraphy" (2004, Jesse Lerner) and five other shorts. ♦ Dec. 27 at 5: "Monograph in Stereo" (2004, Darrin Martin) and six other shorts. ♦ Through Dec. 31, 2005: "112 Years of Cinema," one film from each year of moving-image history. Dec. 15 at 6: "Dodsworth" (1936, William Wyler). ♦ Dec. 17 at 7: "Adorable" (1933, William Dieterle). ♦ Dec. 17 at 8:45 and Dec. 24 at 5: "Sex, Lies, and Videotape" (1989, Steven Soderbergh). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8: "The Battle of Midway" (1942, John Ford) and "The Land" (1942, Robert and Frances Flaherty). ♦ Dec. 19 at 5: "Phffft!" (1954, Mark Robson). ♦ Dec. 23 at 5: "Looking for Richard" (1996, Al Pacino). ♦ Dec. 26 at 2:30: "Bird" (1988, Clint Eastwood). ♦ Dec. 27 at 8:30: "Adua and Her Friends" (1960, Antonio Pietrangeli; in Italian). ♦ Dec. 27 at 8:30: "Sugarland Express" (1974, Steven Spielberg).

SUNSHINE CINEMA
143 E. Houston St. (212-330-8182)—Midnight movies. Dec. 17-18: "Tim Burton's Nightmare Before Christmas" (1993, Henry Selick). ♦ Dec. 25: "The Muppets Take Manhattan" (1984, Frank Oz).

THALIA THEATRE
Symphony Space, Broadway at 95th St. (212-864-5400)—Dec. 18, Dec. 21, and Dec. 28 at 6: "Tarnation" (2004, Jonathan Caouette). ♦ Dec. 18, Dec. 21, and Dec. 28 at 8: "La Dolce Vita" (1960, Federico Fellini; in Italian).

WALTER READE THEATRE
Lincoln Center (212-875-5600)—Through Dec. 28: "Spanish Cinema Now." Dec. 15 at 2 and 6:15: "Hotel Danubio" (2003, Antonio Giménez-Rico). ♦ Dec. 15 at 4 and 8:15: "Summer Clouds" (2004, Felipe Varga). ♦ Dec. 16 at 2 and Dec. 18 at 4:20: "That Happy Couple" (1951, Juan Antonio Bardem and Luis G. Berlanga). ♦ Dec. 16 at 4 and Dec. 19 at 1:30: "Life Goes On" (1963, Fernando Fernán-Gómez). ♦ Dec. 17 at 2 and 6:15, Dec. 19 at 8:45, and Dec. 21 at 1: "The 7th Day" (2004, Carlos Saura). ♦ Dec. 17 at 4:15 and 8:20, Dec. 18 at 6:15, and Dec. 21 at 9: "The Archimedes Principle" (2004, Gerardo Herrero). ♦ Dec. 18 at 2 and Dec. 19 at 6:20: "Basque Ball" (2004, Julio Medem). ♦ Dec. 18 at 8:30 and Dec. 19 at 4: Spanish shorts program. ♦ Dec. 20 at 1:45 and 6:15 and Dec. 22 at 4 and 8:30: "Your Next Life" (2003, Manuel Gutiérrez Aragón). ♦ Dec. 20 at 4 and 8:30 and Dec. 22 at 1:45 and 6:15: "Léon and Olvido" (2004, Xavier Sánchez Bermúdez). ♦ Dec. 23 at 1:30 and 6:15: "Mambrú Went to War" (1985, Fernán-Gómez). ♦ Dec. 23 at 3:30 and 8:15: "Voyage to Nowhere" (1986, Fernán-Gómez). ♦ Dec. 24 at 2 and 6:15 and Dec. 26 at 4:15 and 8:30: "Things That Make Life Worth Living" (2004, Manuel Gómez Perieira). ♦ Dec. 24 at 4 and 8:15 and Dec. 26 at 2 and 6:15: "Voices in the Night" (2004, Salvador García Ruiz). ♦ Dec. 27 at 1 and 6 and Dec. 28 at 3:45 and 8:45: "Belle Époque" (1992, Fernando Trueba). ♦ Dec. 27 at 3:15 and 8:15 and Dec. 28 at 1 and 6: "The Grandfather" (1998, José Luis Garci).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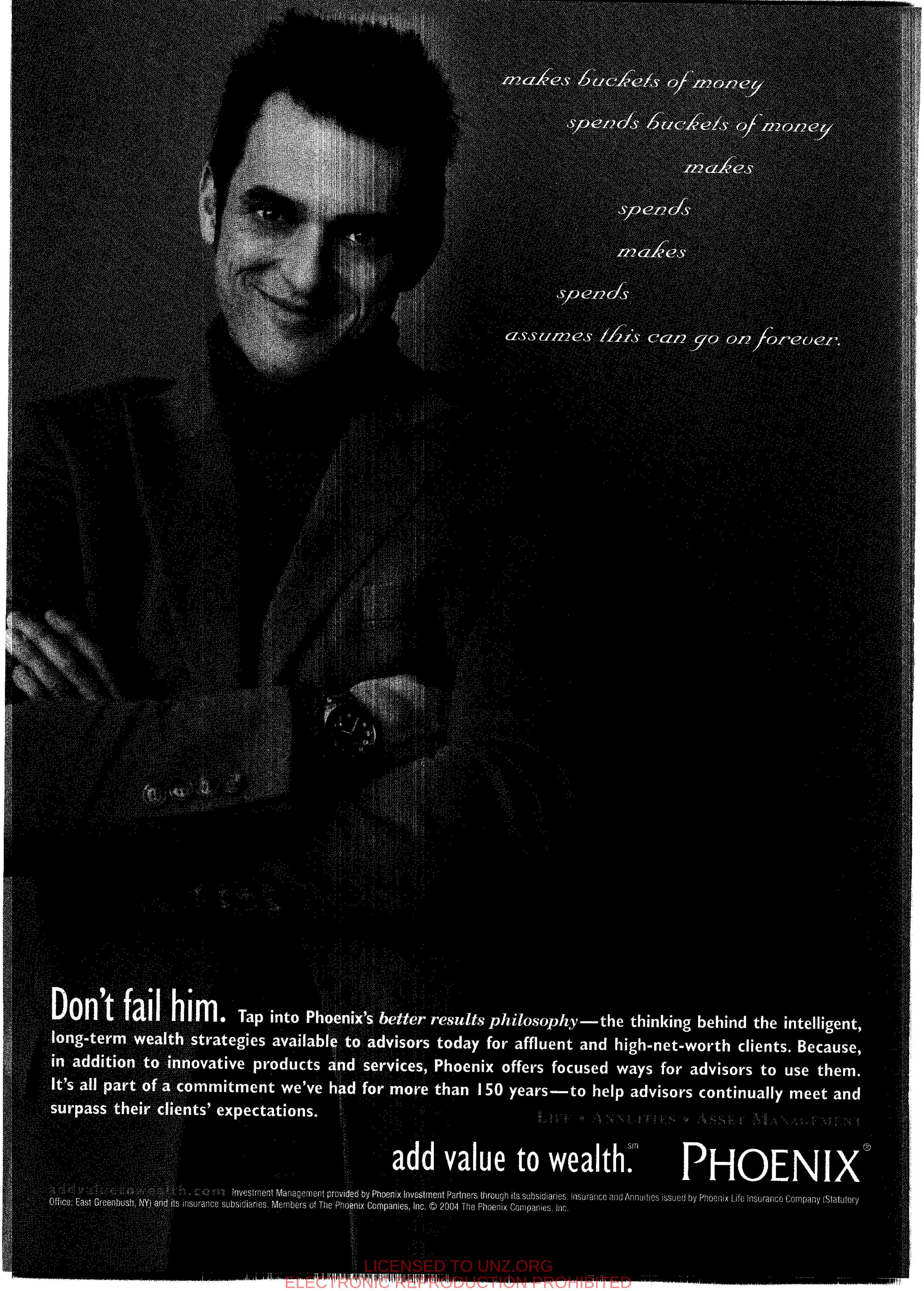
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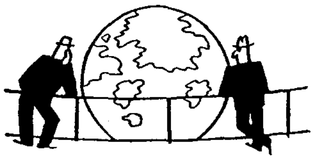
THE NEW YORKER

THE TALK OF THE TOWN

COMMENT
INVASION VS. PERSUASION



President Bush has put the idea of spreading democracy around the world at the rhetorical heart of American foreign policy. No one should doubt that he and his surviving senior advisers believe in what they call the "forward strategy of freedom," even if they've had to talk themselves into it. Dick Cheney, Donald Rumsfeld, Condoleezza Rice, and Bush himself are latecomers to the idea; in earlier incarnations, they sounded a lot more like Henry Kissinger than like Woodrow Wilson. By now, though, it's clear that, however clumsy and selective the execution, Bush wants democratization to be his legacy. So when his critics, here and abroad, claim that his rhetoric merely provides cynical cover for an American power grab, they misjudge his sincerity and tend to sound like defenders of the status quo. And when the Administration tries to wring every last sweet drop of partisan gain from its foreign policy (sincerity is not the same thing as honesty), critics are driven to conclude that "democracy" is just another word for "neoconservatism."

This is not a good position for the opposition to be in, either morally or politically. The best role for critics in the President's second term will be not to scoff at the idea of spreading freedom but to take it seriously—to hold him to his own talk. The hard question isn't whether America should try to enlarge the democratic order but how. It's a question that the Administration seems to have thought about very little, yet it makes a big difference. Look at the two examples from the week's front pages: where the approach has been subtle and collective, the outcome seems hopeful; where it has been noisy and unilateralist, it does not.

The popular uprising in Ukraine has now secured a new Presidential election, the previous vote having been discredited by huge fraud. There's a quiet American story behind that achievement. For years, beginning in the nineteen-nineties, governmental and non-governmental organizations poured millions of dollars into Ukraine's politics, building up the parties, training civil-society groups and journalists, establishing election monitors. These efforts helped strengthen the opposition against a corrupt government, but they were nonpartisan: technical support was given to all parties. The work in Ukraine built on earlier experiences in Serbia and Georgia, where groups like the National Endowment for Democracy and the Open Society Institute contributed, behind the scenes, to popular movements that eventually seized the moment to overthrow strongmen. Three peaceful democratic revolutions in ex-Communist countries in four years—a tremendous success, and few Americans even know that part of the credit belongs to this country.

GRAND CENTRAL TERMINAL

LAURENT CILLUFFO

Not surprisingly, the outgoing President of Ukraine, Leonid Kuchma, and the Russian President, Vladimir Putin, have complained about American meddling. So has an unlikely tandem in this country. "Ukraine has been turned into a geostrategic matter not by Moscow but by Washington, which refuses to abandon its Cold War policy of encircling Russia and seeking to pull every former Soviet Republic into its orbit," *The Nation* claimed, once again taking the Russian side of the Cold War. And Pat Buchanan declared, "Congress should investigate N.E.D. and any organization that used clandestine cash or agents to fix the Ukrainian election, as the U.S. media appear to have gone into the tank for global democracy."

But in Ukraine the meddlers have done nothing worse than help guarantee a people's right to choose a government freely. The effort succeeded for two reasons: there was a democratic movement already in place; and outside support did not come with a "Made in America" label, because the Organization for Security and Coöperation in Europe also played an important part. "The thrust of the campaign is to oblige Ukraine to have a free and fair election," Thomas Carothers, a democracy expert at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, says. "This is a human right. It's not American. It's not unilateralist."

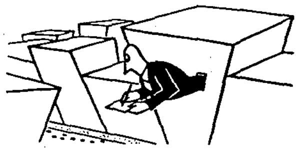
In other words, the United States did in Ukraine exactly what it failed to do in Iraq: it upheld international standards in conjunction with democratic allies. The consequences of this failure in Iraq will always haunt the American effort there. The war has grown so destructive that Afghanistan, where Hamid Karzai was just inaugurated as the first democratically elected President, has become the Administration's success story almost by default. But Karzai's victory only ratified a political consensus that had been hammered out by anti-Taliban parties, under United Nations auspices, in Bonn in 2001, and had won immediate international recognition. In Iraq, the United States has tried to stage-manage the political transition alone, and has seen every plan overtaken and nullified by events. Lacking legitimacy in the eyes of both Iraq and the rest of the world, defying international standards and declaring its own, the Administration has had to base its claim on good intentions. But in the war of perception between that claim and the daily stories of tortured prisoners and civilian deaths America is losing. According to Carothers, who has just co-edited the first technical book on democracy promotion in the Middle East, the Iraq model has set back the cause of Arab reformers.

At this point, the Administration seems ready to hold an election and declare victory. Meanwhile, the insurgency looks increasingly like a civil war. An election, though politically necessary, might only worsen the conflict. Shiite politicians and clerics are organizing a unified ballot that will guarantee the majority Shiites a vast share of next month's election spoils at the expense of the country's alienated Sunnis. The elected parliament, which will write a constitution, isn't likely to be truly representative, or to create a political consensus out of this violent polarization. More probably, the losers will opt out and the civil war will intensify. The alternative of delaying elections, advocated by some Sunni and Kurdish politicians and, privately, by some Administration officials, would only antagonize the leading Shiite cleric, Ayatollah Ali al-Sistani, the one indispensable man in Iraq today. Delay would also perpetuate the occupation. As always in Iraq, America is faced with bad choices.

Not every country is lucky enough to be Ukraine, where internal opposition and quiet outside help will likely succeed in replacing a bad regime. But the ordeal in Iraq has shown that a war of liberation is a crude instrument for setting a country free. Democracy is not the absence of tyranny. It has to grow from within over time, and it requires far more care and feeding than Washington seems able to give.

—*George Packer*

THE DIPLOMATS JUST WHISTLE



The other day, Andrew Thomson, a doctor at the United Nations, received a memo thanking him for his service to the organization—service that extends back twelve years, and includes stints exhuming mass graves in Bosnia and Rwanda. The purpose of the memo was to inform Dr. Thomson that this service was now complete (contract: not renewed), and that his replacement would be starting on January 1st.

No reason was given, but Thomson wasn't surprised. He had been officially reprimanded in June for publishing a book without the U.N.'s permission. The book, "Emergency Sex and Other Desperate Measures: A True Story from Hell on Earth," published by Miramax, was written by Thomson and two U.N. colleagues, Kenneth Cain and Heidi Postlewait, and it is a diary-style account of several years spent on the peacekeeping front lines in the mid-nineties, during some of the gloomiest (and bloodiest) days in the institution's history—"a real-life modern-day M*A*S*H," according to the publisher. (The title refers to an erotic mid-trauma dalliance—love among the killings.) Cain has since left the U.N., but Postlewait remains an administrative assistant in the Department of Peacekeeping Operations, and she, too, received a reprimand. (Her contract is not up for eighteen more months.)

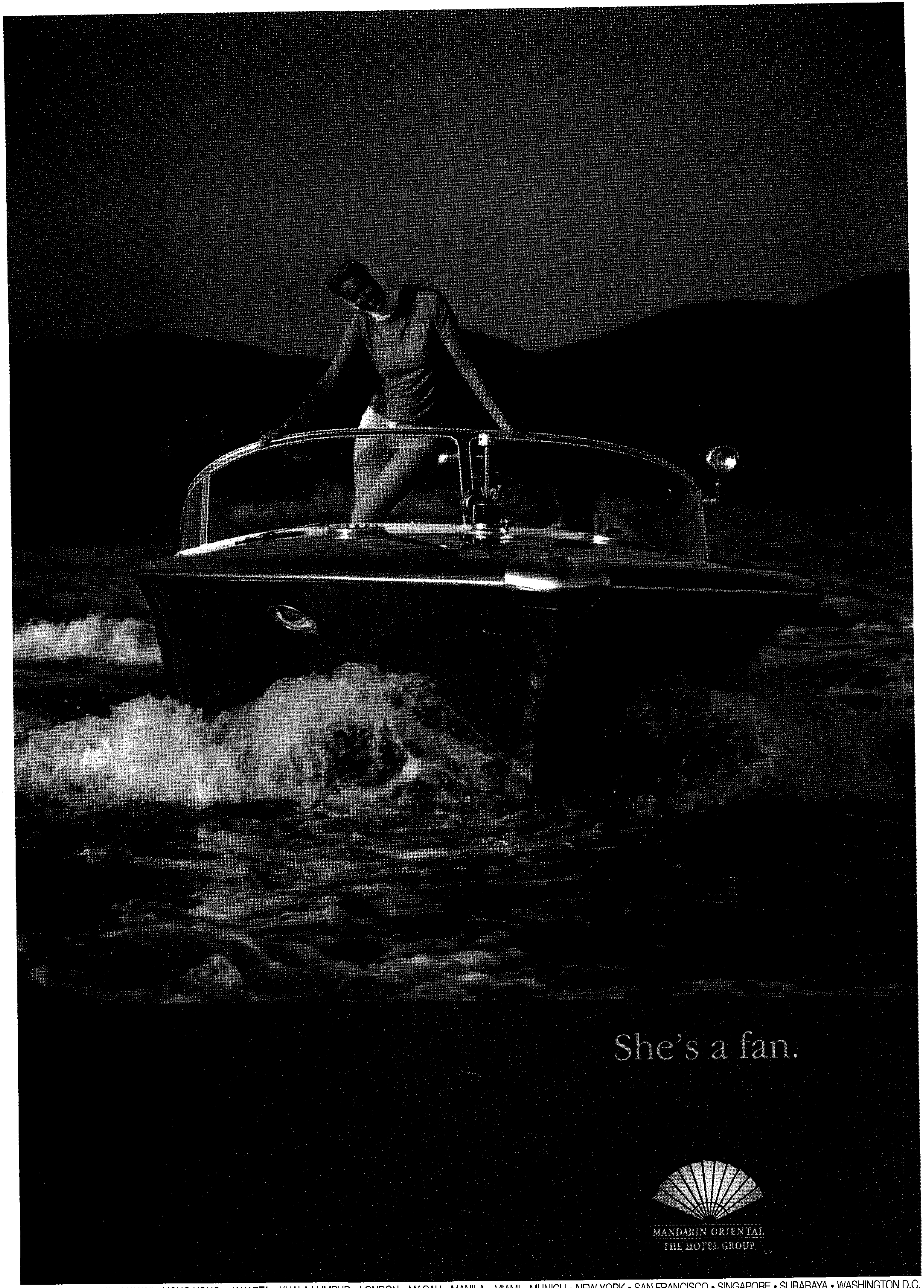
Senior U.N. officials were not terribly pleased with the book. Fred Eckhard, Secretary-General Kofi Annan's spokesman, called it "a sensational and selective account of peacekeeping." Shashi Tharoor, the Under-Secretary-General for Communications and Public Information (and an overseer of the peacekeeping mission in the former Yugoslavia, which is criticized in the book), has accused the authors of disloyalty.

Reached last week, Tharoor said, "It didn't seem right for people to work for the organization and trash it the way these people did." Doing so while collecting a paycheck, he said, was "slightly contemptible."

Now Thomson and Postlewait have sought the help of the Government Accountability Project, or GAP, a leading whistle-blower law firm, which has represented, among others, David Graham, the F.D.A. doctor who cried foul on Vioxx. Earlier this month, GAP sent a letter to Kofi Annan requesting a personal meeting and threatening legal action.

"Emergency Sex," with its tales of drug use and disillusionment and its emphasis on personal drama, is not a typical whistle-blowing tract. ("I want to rip my clothes off, rip Yusuf's clothes off, and just fuck him right there.") But the authors do make a number of serious allegations of corruption, negligence, and inadequate leadership, particularly with regard to the genocides in Rwanda and Srebrenica. ("The U.N. was here"—in Rwanda—"when the massacres started, twenty-five hundred troops. U.N. headquarters in New York knew it was being planned, they had files and faxes and informants, and they sat in their offices, consulted each other, and ate long lunches.")

At issue is whether such criticisms constitute whistle-blowing or mere harsh assessment. "I'm not sure that, in most people's understanding, writing a book ten years later, when it's too late to fix the problems you're describing—and when the problems belong to a particular era which is now well behind us—qualifies as whistle-blowing," Tharoor said.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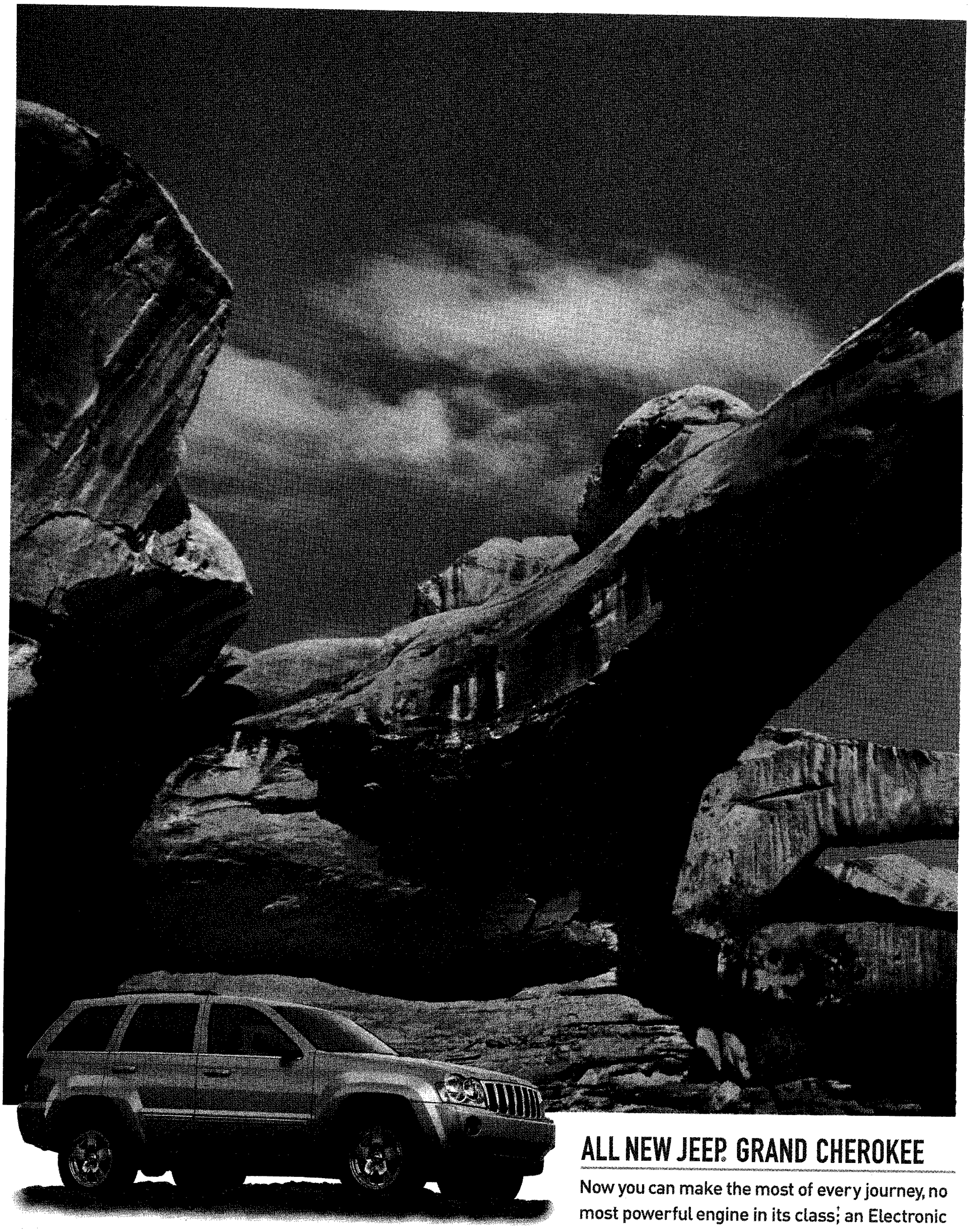

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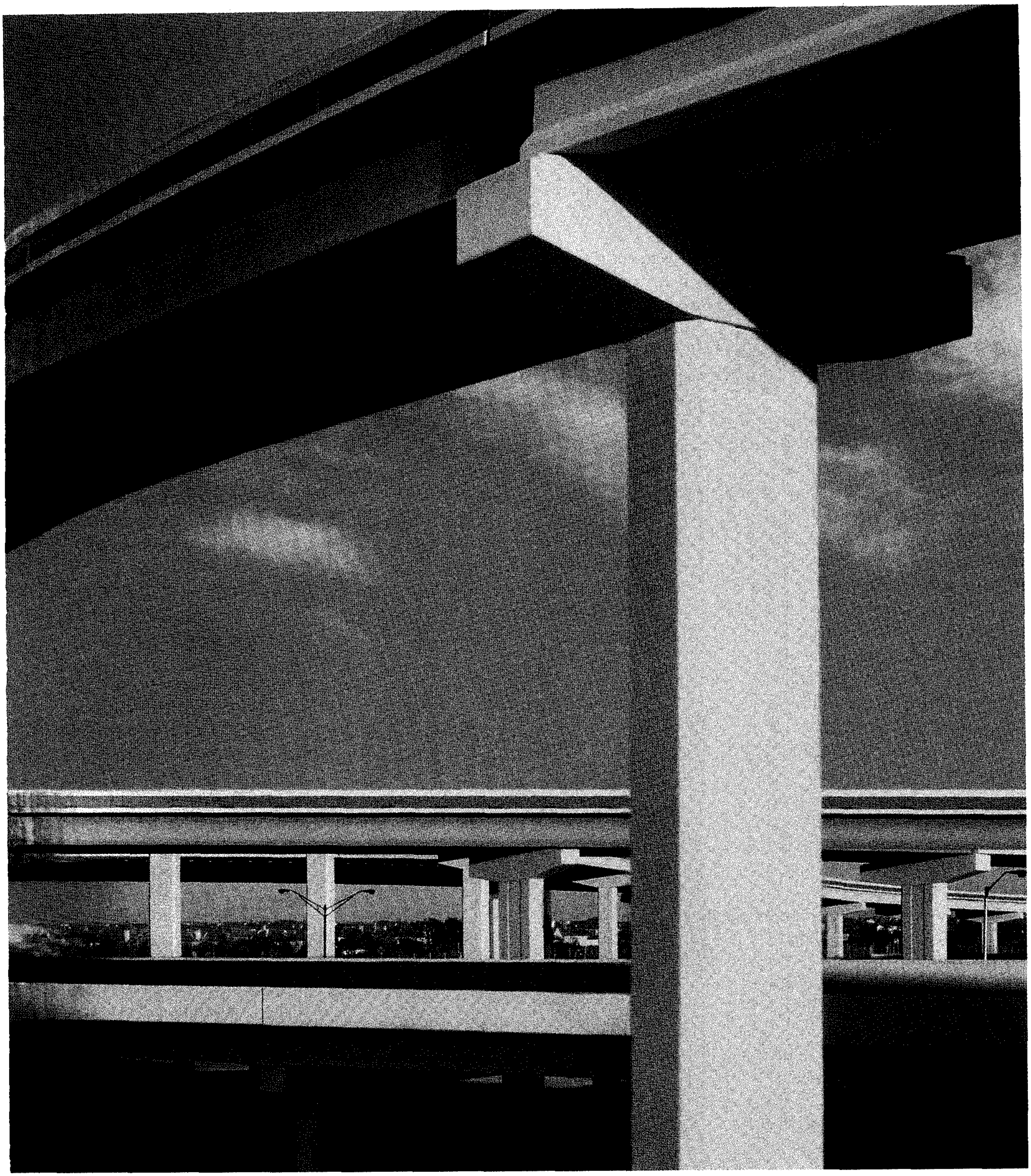

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"That's certainly not our understanding."

"There are some very significant disclosures," Tom Devine, GAP's legal director, said. "From what I've seen as a whistle-blowing lawyer for almost twenty-six years, if this is accurate the human consequences exposed by whistle-blowing in this book are equal to the stakes of all the other cases in my career combined." GAP's letter to Annan cites nearly two dozen instances in the book of alleged misconduct, the revelation of which, according to GAP, ought to be protected by the Whistleblower Protection Act of 1989. It also suggests that Tharoor's public remarks hinted at a de-facto gag rule—a kind of Turtle Bay *omertà*.

The timing, for the authors, at least, is opportune. The U.N. has been under fire lately, amid the oil-for-food scandal and claims of sexual harassment. Last Wednesday, Annan met directly with the Staff Council, following an internal "Integrity Perception Survey," which had shown, ironically, that staff members generally were wary of " 'whistle-blowing' or reporting on misconduct." As of late last week, Annan had not replied to Devine's letter, and the book's authors, brimming with indignation, seemed eager for a fight.

"I doubt Mr. Annan and Shashi Tharoor know what an American public-interest law firm is all about," Cain said, on the phone from Sarajevo. "They thought they were immune, the way they're immune from parking tickets."

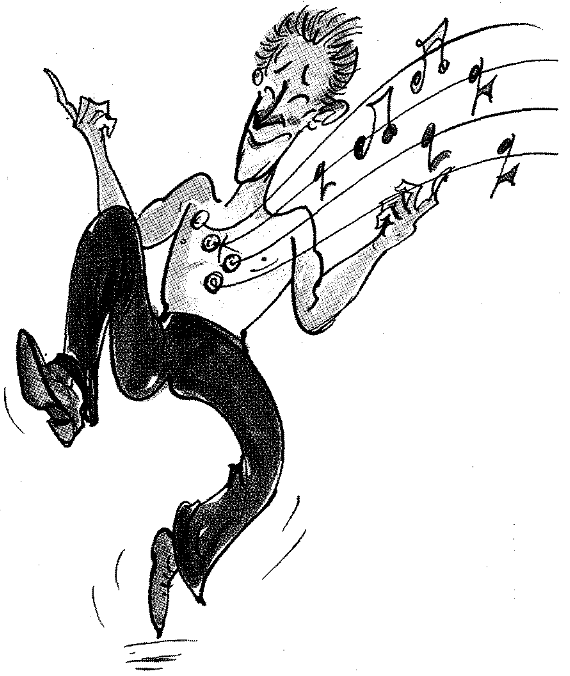
Thomson, who is from New Zealand, is stationed in Geneva for the remainder of his term. "I think Shashi Tharoor has put himself and the organization on a really slippery slope," he said, "and at the ugly bottom of that you run into historical revisionism and Holocaust deniers." Be that as it may, Thomson would be happy simply to have his job back. "I want to go on serving as a doctor to the staff," he said.

And, if he can't, there's always the consolation that "Emergency Sex" has been optioned for television. Randall Wallace, who wrote the screenplays for "Braveheart" and "Pearl Harbor," is working on a script.

—*Ben McGrath*

LAB NOTEBOOK
MEET THE BEATLES, AGAIN

Hypothesis: The recent release of the American versions of four early Beatles albums in CD form has caused excitement among fans of a certain age; therefore, listening to the CDs should give rise to measurable physiological responses indicating that the level of joy provided by the American versions exceeds the supposedly superior original British versions (which contain some different songs, in different order) and that anyone who thinks otherwise is just plain wrong.



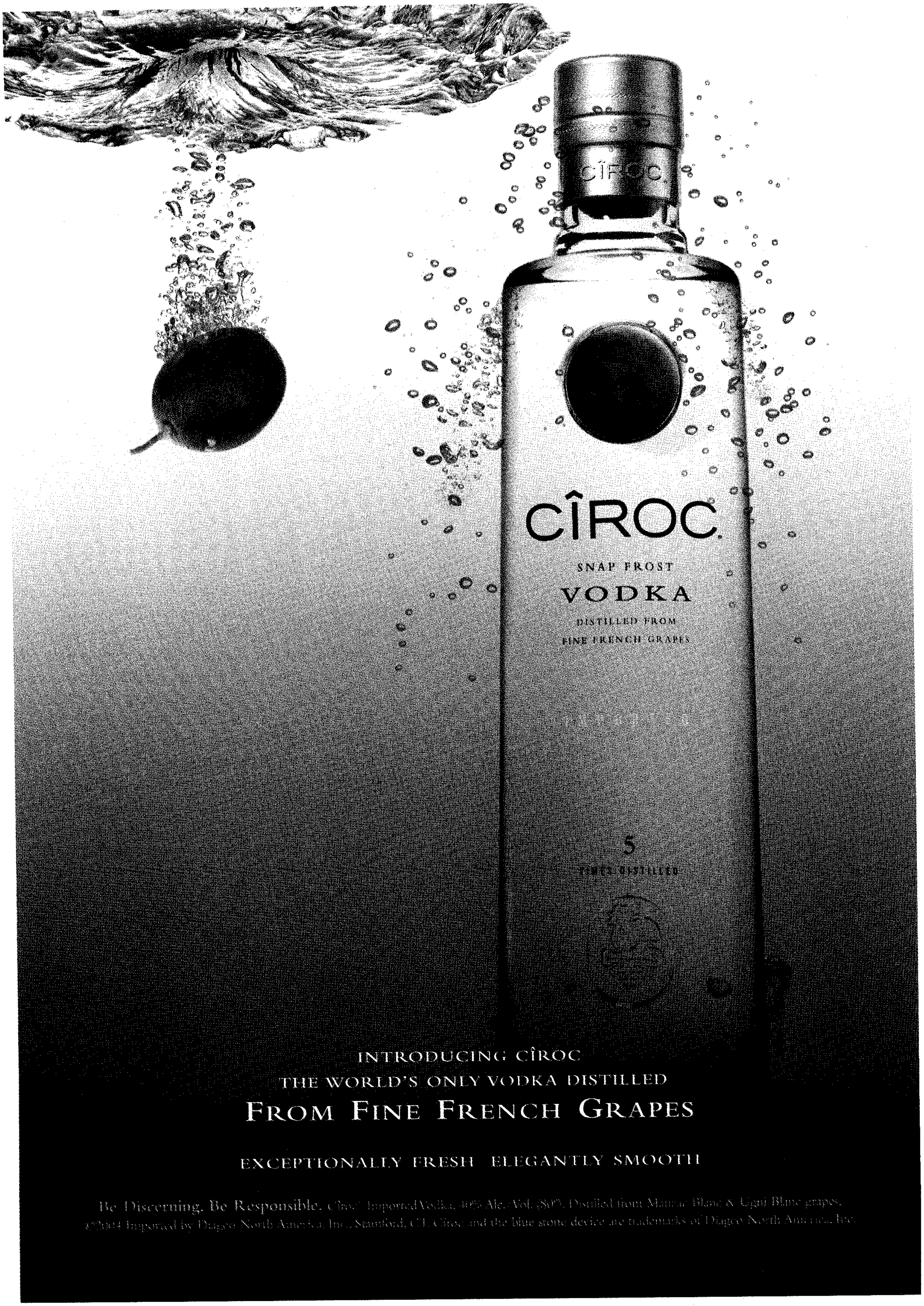
GERALD SCARFE

In order to test the hypothesis, subjects would listen to two songs on "Meet the Beatles!" while their vital signs were monitored. To qualify for the experiment, subjects were required to have fulfilled the following conditions: (1) They had to confirm that they loved the Beatles from the moment they heard "Meet the Beatles!" in 1964. (2) They had to swear that they had listened to the album constantly for months on end and knew by heart the order of the songs on the album. Most prospective subjects were eliminated, either because in 1964 they would have been too young or too old to really get the Beatles or because of simple prejudice on the part of the experimenter. Four subjects, ranging in age from forty-four to fifty-four, were found to be suitable, and were persuaded to give up their lunch hour in order to further the cause of science.

Materials: (1) One biofeedback device, for the purpose of measuring galvanic skin resistance. As explained in the instruction manual, "GSR is a reflection of variations in your sweat-gland activity and pore size. . . . When you become excited, frightened, or disturbed to any degree, the [sympathetic nervous] system activates chemical and physical changes all through your body." (2) One heart-rate monitor, which, in the terminology used in the song "I Saw Her Standing There," would indicate whether a subject's "heart went boom" upon hearing the songs on "Meet the Beatles!" (3) One sphygmomanometer, whose technical name is "that inflatable thing that they put on your arm when you go for a checkup and the nurse squeezes the bulb and then tells you what your blood pressure is." (4) One boom box. (5) Four mood rings.

Procedure: Before turning on the music, the experimenter gave each of the four subjects incomprehensible instructions about how to use the equipment; special attention was given to the heart monitor, a strap-on device that circled the subject's bare torso and contained electrodes that had to be moistened with water. There was tacit agreement between the experimenter and the subjects to pretend not to notice any excess weight in their abdominal areas that was exposed during the placement of the device. Two of the subject's fingers were placed on the sensing plates of the biofeedback device. A lab assistant with a B.A. in English was put in charge of measuring the subjects' blood pressure both before and after listening to "I Want to Hold Your Hand" and "I Saw Her Standing There," the first two songs on the record. The mood rings, whose colors precisely describe the fluctuations in emotional states, were distributed among the participants.

Results: The before-and-after blood-pressure readings were hard to determine, because of the lab assistant's lack of familiarity with the sphygmomanometer. After she reported that one participant had no blood pressure, it was decided to disregard all of her results. Also, non-stop jackham-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mering at a construction site near the testing room may have contributed to artificially high blood-pressure readings in the three subjects from whom results could be obtained, and in the experimenter.

The subjects' GSR readings all showed increased skin resistance, indicating that the subjects were alive at the time of the experiment.

The color changes in the mood rings did not follow any obvious pattern. One of them changed from blue-green ("flirty," according to an accompanying chart) to purple ("excited"). One ring stayed at blue-green, and one went from blue ("calm") to blue-green. One ring was lost track of. At no time during the playing of Beatles songs were any rings black ("sad") or amber ("crabby").

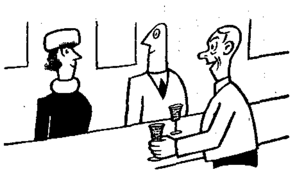
The most reliable physiological yardstick appeared to be heart rate, which in each case increased dramatically during the playing of "I Want to Hold Your Hand," and in two cases increased further when "I Saw Her Standing There" came on. It seems likely that the memory of hearing those songs played in that order forty years ago caused the subjects' hearts to burst with happiness, as witnessed in the rocking body movements and vocalizing that occurred, along with facial expressions associated anecdotally with delight.

Conclusions: Although the scientific validity of this experiment can be called into question, owing to the small sample size, the poor testing conditions, the failure to control any variables (including the effect that ingestion of cookies by two subjects during the experiment may have had), and the carefree methodological approach, the experimenter feels it is possible nonetheless to conclude that the heart does not lie, and that true love never dies.

—*Nancy Franklin*

THE BENCH

HIGH TEA



The fortune of the Bronfman family, the owner of Seagram's, originated with a Montreal bootlegging business during Prohibition. (The name "Bronfman" means "whiskey man" in Yiddish.) A few weeks ago, the Supreme Court took up a long-running controversy involving a third-generation Bronfman and another mind-altering substance, this one imported from the Amazon rain forest rather than from Canada.

The case began with a small religious group known as O Centro Espirita Beneficiente União do Vegetal ("Central Beneficial Spirit United from the Plants"), which was founded in Brazil in 1961 and has about eight thousand members there. The religion blends traditional Christian theology with indigenous beliefs, and a central tenet of the faith is the drinking of a tea known as hoasca. According to church doctrine, members can fully perceive God only by drinking the tea. Hoasca (pronounced "wass-ca") is brewed from two plants that grow in the Amazon River Basin, and it contains DMT, a hallucinogen that the American government regards as a controlled substance.

In the early nineties, Jeffrey Bronfman, a forty-nine-year-old ecological activist, began making trips to the rain forest. There he became fascinated by U.D.V., as the religion is known, and first drank hoasca tea. "I was very moved and inspired by what I witnessed," he wrote later, in a declaration to the courts. Bronfman learned Portuguese and trained to become a *mestre*, which is the title given to the clergy in the faith. In 1994, he became the president of the American branch of U.D.V. There are now about a hundred and thirty congregants in the United States, about fifty of them in Sante Fe, where Bronfman lives.

As a *mestre*, Bronfman presides at twice-monthly Saturday-night services. He gives each U.D.V. member a glass of the tea, and then, after a prayer in Portuguese, the congregation drinks together. The ensuing service involves ritual singing, "individualized contemplation," and "a more informal period of unstructured conversation among the congregants." Bronfman also writes that "U.D.V. sessions are not characterized by entertainment, frivolity, or pleasure-seeking." (Terence McKenna, a Berkeley-educated ethnobotanist who is an authority on DMT, has written that using such a substance brings a person into contact with entities that he calls "self-transforming machine elves"; for Alan Watts, a cohort of Timothy Leary's, using DMT was like "being fired out of the nozzle of an atomic cannon." At any rate, it's no Chivas.)

On May 21, 1999, federal agents raided Bronfman's office at the church and seized about thirty gallons of hoasca tea. No one was arrested, but the group had to stop using the tea. In response, the U.D.V. and Bronfman sued the federal government, charging that the prohibition on hoasca violated their right to freedom of religion.

Through almost five years of litigation, which has produced hundreds of pages of decisions from several different courts, the U.D.V. has won nearly every round. "This Court cannot find . . . that the government has proven that Hoasca poses a serious health risk to the members of the U.D.V. who drink the tea in a ceremonial setting," Judge James A. Parker wrote in an early decision. Last month, with all of the active judges on the United States Court of Appeals for the Tenth Circuit present, the court ruled, eight to five, that U.D.V. could continue to use hoasca. Last month, though, the Bush Administration filed an emergency application for a temporary stay of that ruling, arguing that it could open the door for religious-based claims for marijuana, LSD, and heroin. On December 1st, Justice Stephen Breyer, who supervises the Tenth Circuit, granted the government's request for a stay. "It's maddening," Nancy Hollander, one of U.D.V.'s lawyers, said last week. "We keep winning, but we can't win."

Bronfman writes in his declaration (he declined to be interviewed) that the investigation, and the consequent loss of hoasca, "has been a time of almost indescribable stress and sadness for me. The effect of all this has produced tremendous strain on my family, my personal health and, to some degree, my religious faith."

For all Bronfman's passion, it seems unlikely that even a victory in the Supreme Court will lead to a surge in the tea's popularity as a recreational drug. "I tried it three times in Brazil," Richard Glen Boire, who is the co-director of the Center for Cognitive Liberty and Ethics, a libertarian-leaning think tank that has closely monitored the case, said last week. "It just tastes horrendous. Almost everyone who drinks it throws up. Ninety per cent of the people who try it will have the most horrendous physical experience that they have ever had in their lives. It's terrifying, but kind of profound, too."

—*Jeffrey Toobin*

Smoke detectors Taximeters Airport screening devices Batteries Exit signs Conveyor belts Diapers Water disinfection Laboratory planning and design High-speed serial data cable assemblies Pneumatic filters Electric valve actuators Warning lights Coffee cups Power strips Strainers Electrical raceways Integrated fire protection cabinets Static control devices PC boards Master terminal boxes Lighting controls Bus and expansion slot connectors Subsystem integration and full-system assembly Variable-flow regulator assemblies Protection against electrical supply interruption Abrasion protection products Vehicle tactical repeaters Air conditioning equipment and systems Multi-coaxial cables Nasopharyngeal sensors Wastewater treatment plant design and engineering Rotational sensors Micro K relays Industrial automation Plastic knives, forks, and spoons Fire and emergency annunciators Drawer connectors LEDs Microelectronic sub-assembly Firefighter breathing systems Ground fault detector protective relays Solenoids Heavy-duty miniature applicators Absorbents and dessicants Voice networks Sea plows for undersea excavation Insulators Medical electrode gels Welded steel tubing Micropatch antennas Filters Thermocouple cables Avionics Polyethylene stretch films Backplane connector systems Conformal antennas **High-performance relays** Lamps Serving trays Battery chargers Drills Panel boards Audio receivers Wire basket cable trays Pressure vessel clamps Snow melting mats Matrix switchers Amplitude measurement equipment Salve Telephony analysis Automatic door controls Well cleaners and developers Automotive micro power relays Plastic protective sheeting Patch cable Automotive mini power relays Transmission line accessories hazard detection products Building wraps Vending machine components Scales Intuitive LCD and CRT touchmonitors USB connectors Cable clamps Micropneumatic systems Cable ducting systems Sealants and gels Electrical metallic tubing set-screw connectors and couplings Insulation facers Call center monitoring services Relays with forcibly-guided contacts Spa controls Industrial control hybrids Gas masks Laser rangefinders Sodium bicarbonate based extinguishing agents Flame-retardant drapery systems Resuscitators for infants and children Digital watch parts Shade canopy accessories Barrier strips Chalkboards Therapeutic ultrasound PIN photo diode modules Medical monitoring services Check valves Resin systems Chemical oxygen generators All-in-one touch computers Chartering cable ships Elastic bandages Wireless systems Chillers Semiconductor heat sinks Digital audio services Automotive module relays Surface mounted cabinets Rotary switches Flame retardants Pressure seal closures Electric portable air compressors Circuit breakers Automotive quality inspection equipment Solid-state components Gas discharge tube replacements Components for camcorders Panel indicators Heat isolation devices Explosion-proof detectors Climate monitoring Hazardous material protective suits Solid-state subsystems Signal magnetics Passive electronics Medical oxygen delivery Grounding connectors Telescoping sign support systems Broadband driver amplifiers Champagne glasses Drinking bottles Polymeric and porcelain surge arrestors for distribution and transmission networks Automotive power relays Garment hangers Microcoaxial assemblies Snack food packaging Modem cable assemblies Industrial control switches Continuous-slot metal framing Landfill development Multi-mode radar Patch cable assemblies Shielded and coaxial cable slices Wine glasses Flame-retardant tape Range hoods Halogen-free cables for commercial and offshore applications Absorbable monofilament sutures Cable TV converters Terminals and connectors for underground networks Syringe dispensers Cordless telephone batteries Fire protection systems Tubing for outdoor furniture framing Sensor wraps Easels PIN diodes High-performance solid state relays and power controllers Wire harness tape Ceramic burners Electrical equipment for saunas Cylindrical control connectors Terminals and splices Security systems Relay sockets and accessories Arson detection Galvanized steel tubing Paperboard Counters and timers Sealed connectors Databus assemblies Television sets DC converters Subcutaneous sensors Pipe and tube products Electrical tape High pass filter inductors Pistol grip hand tool systems for IDCs Adhesive tape Segmentally welded pipe fittings USB cables Construction management Deactivators International mains adaptors Suction instruments Test equipment Steel box connectors Calibration equipment and services Plastic tumblers Cable trays Verified audio detection Thermoplastic piping systems Coaxial cable terminators Pigtail cable assemblies Waveguides Plastics engineering Institutional timekeeping Photocopiers Cabled and blind-mate power connectors High-performance connectors Safety relief valves Access floor modules Halogen-free wire Power systems Raised face flanges Connectors for high-voltage substations Flexible non-metallic conduit Reduced wall flexible metal conduit Catheters Medication nebulizers Digital metering systems Wiring harness sockets Automobile steering columns Pediatric monitoring equipment Cable design conductors Flame-retardant tubing for nuclear environments Rooftop walkways Digital products Air sampling equipment Voltage wheels Customized point-of-sale receipts Digital proofing Power tool switches Chokes Medical diagnostics Sound mixers Air traffic control equipment Digital visual interface products Vertical drain membranes and radiant barriers Cabinet power systems Wall track systems DIP switches Resistor protection Thermostats Electrical transformers High-performance RF/microwave antennas Lighting for public services Video cables Thermal circuit breakers Video endoscopy Cable assemblies Irrigation pipe Heat-tracing connectors Potassium bicarbonate-based extinguishing agents Megaphone components Calculators Institutional can liners Voltage-variable attenuators Wafer gear Varactors Coaxial cables Patient monitoring cables Drop cloths Alarms for hazardous areas Power splitters Chassis components Stormwater and wastewater studies Card readers with web-based authentication Printer cable assemblies Engineering services Amusement machine components Disp[illegible] resuscitators Systems for offshore oil and gas installations Patch panels Airport lighting systems Soldering equipment Lo[illegible] cable systems Entry modules Microsurgical needles Cryogenic valves Wiring harness design software Automotive comp[illegible] assisted design services Porcelain disc insulators Flex and rigid circuits Diagnostic procedure trays Inkjet fluids Diagnostic a[illegible]ress testing [illegible]ape plastic sheeting Rechargeable car flashlights Memory card receptacles Spirometry systems Automatic blood pressure infusors Coated and cloth-backed building and construction tapes Power magnetics Exhausters Ultraviolet disinfection systems Moisture analysis equipment Flange gaskets with bulb elastomers Exotic alloys Professional fire department hardware Custom sterilizable cable assemblies Skin effect trace systems Dental dressings and sutures Parts for lawn and garden equipment Tape measures Flame detectors Ribbon cables Carpet backing Parallel groove clamps Graphic arts tape Extended coverage fire sprinkler heads Hand pumps Climate control monitoring Satellite radio [illegible] audio systems Jacket compounds Galvanized steel armor with PVC jackets Irrigation pumps Utility cabinets Cyanoacrylate [illegible] adhesives Large-screen video projectors Eye pads Arterial extension sets Paper mill wraps Fence framew[illegible] Distribution panels Continuous timers Protective breathing equipment Special purpose spiral antennas Automatic pick, place and press Power toggle switches Fiber-optic connectors Veterinary medical products Bypass valves Carbon dioxide gas transmitters Specialty chemicals Rainfall gauges Alarms for motor vehicles Water sampling and analysis Fingerprint identification Mobile security systems Cable ties Firefighting flares Multiplier diodes Fireproof cables Drum core magnetics Audio receivers Flexible exhaust connectors Isolators and circulators Magnet wire termination machines Dual hybrids Static measuring equipment Hand-held radios Cable management accessories Steam-tracing products Extrusion lamination Parking deck PVC-jacketed metal clad cable Factory automation cables Steelwork fixings Airport construction management instrument winterization Cotton balls Pipe for recreational equipment Self-adhesive cable clips Multi-pair high flexibility cables Fixed cable termination adapters Butterfly valves Portable memory Components for CD recorders and players Telemetry systems Audio production services Integrated molding/plating technology Telephone systems Safety goggles Reverse cutting sutures Decorative shields Temperature and pressure gauges Commercial-quality steel tubing Laser diodes Temperature sensors Connection droppers Dry-erase marker boards Feminine hygiene products Storage tanks Analgesics First aid kits Thermal controls Computer-assisted surgery Power modules Subminiature D connectors Front-connected sockets Digital attenuators Automated teller machine components Spring pin coax probe assemblies Control panels Wet pipe sprinkler systems Alarm verification Security keypads Pain management products Helical gears Roadway and tunnel management systems Printed circuit terminals Galvanized round signposts Rocker and paddle switches Microwave components Roof and gutter heating cables Arson detection Voice amplifiers Fall arrest systems High-voltage connectors Power entry modules Custom broadband networks Steel threadable sprinkler pipe Accounting software Ultrasound cable assemblies Protective clothing for emergency workers Flare launchers Dry pipe systems Cable tie guns Broadband amplifiers Rectangular heavy-duty connectors Discharge devices Vibration dampers Electromagnetic flow readers Laser components Advanced composites Coaxial connectors Adhesive covers Flat steel plates Elastomeric connectors Passive fiber-optic hardware Singulation systems Electrosurgical devices Coffee service kits Automotive radar sensors Electrical metallic tubing compression connectors and couplings Intercommunication devices Customized valves Dry pipe valves Flexible hoses Curing ovens Insulated ground metal clad cables Digital satellite radio antennas Perimeter door and window protection systems Anemometers Cosmetic surgery needles Flexible non-

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THE FINANCIAL PAGE

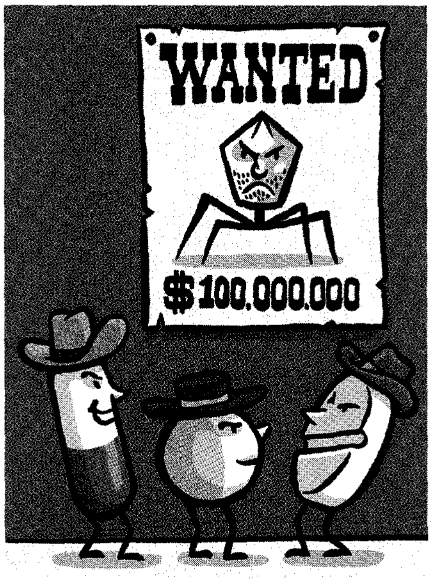
PUSH AND PULL

A couple of weeks ago, Gordon Brown, Britain's Chancellor of the Exchequer, made a promise. The United Kingdom, he said, would buy up to three hundred million doses of a new malaria vaccine for the developing world. It was a welcome sign that the West is finally paying attention to the most important problem in global public health; namely, the spread of infectious diseases like malaria, tuberculosis, and AIDS. It was also something else: a dramatic innovation in the way those diseases are fought.

That's because the vaccine that the U.K. promised to buy doesn't exist yet. There are several good candidates for a malaria vaccine, and one of them, being developed by GlaxoSmithKline, showed excellent results recently in a clinical trial in Mozambique, where it cut the risk of developing severe malaria by fifty-eight per cent. But there are still years of testing and hundreds of millions of dollars in development costs before any viable product could be sold. What Brown's announcement guarantees is that if an effective vaccine emerges there will be someone to buy it at a fair price.

Usually, a company that invents something useful doesn't have much trouble selling it. But vaccines—especially for diseases in the developing world—are notorious exceptions to this rule. To begin with, Third World countries have unimaginably tiny amounts to spend on public health. (The poorer African countries spend eighteen dollars per person a year on health. We spend five thousand dollars.) And then the market value of a vaccine may be a fraction of its *social* value. If you're vaccinated, it not only makes you safer; it makes me and my children safer, too. So though you might be willing to pay the vaccine-maker just two dollars for a shot, its value to your community might be twenty times as great. Governments, of course, could make up the difference, but, historically, they haven't been willing to. Instead, they've used their regulatory and bargaining powers to drive prices down to the bare minimum.

The result is that drug companies have put very little money into vaccine research. They'd much rather invest in an anti-arthritis drug that well-insured Americans will take every day than a vaccine that may never command a fair price. (Just a few years ago, a promising malaria-vaccine candidate that had been tested in Papua New Guinea was abandoned for lack of funding.) Meanwhile, diseases like malaria and tuberculosis have continued to ravage the Third World. Hundreds of millions of people are newly infected every year. And the burden of disease has helped keep sub-Saharan Africa poor: students who are in and out of school have a hard time learning, ailing workers aren't very productive, and Western firms are loath to invest in countries where such diseases are endemic.



When the private sector isn't providing the innovations we need, the traditional answer is to have the government stump up for R.&D. This is what's called "push" funding, because the government chooses among various options and gives its favorites a push. In the case of a malaria or t.b. vaccine, this means that the government sizes up candidates, offers grants, and subsidizes drug companies, universities, or its own research teams as they experiment with the vaccines. In fact, that's what the United States did at the beginning of the nineteen-eighties, when it funded a number of malaria-vaccine projects—none of which panned out.

Instead of deciding in advance which vaccine candidates deserve funding, however, a government could commit itself to paying a reasonable price for whatever vaccine turns out to work, effectively guaranteeing a market for it. Drug companies would thus have an incentive to invest in promising candidates. Rather than pushing vaccines into existence, this approach pulls them.

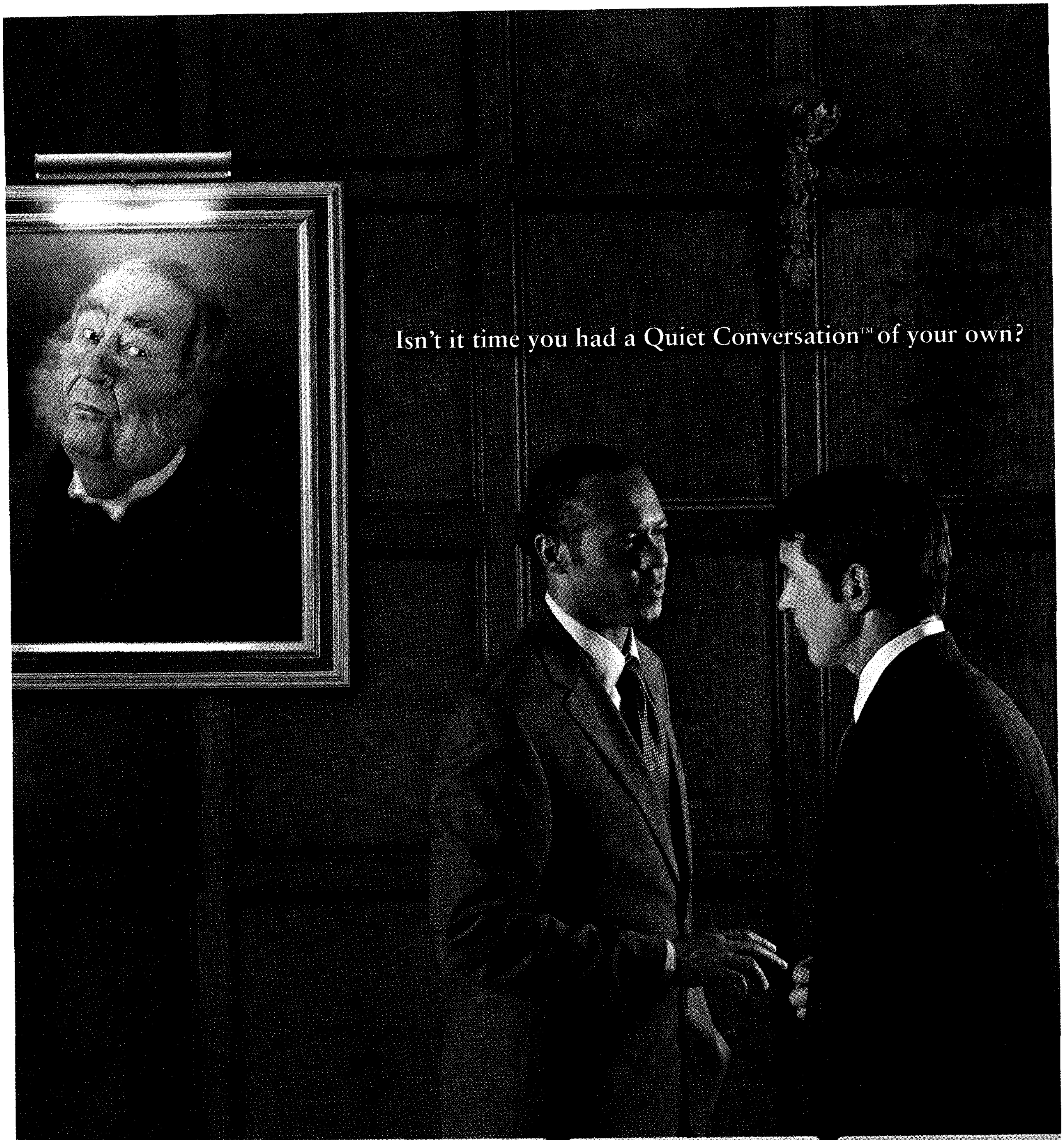
Although "pull" is relatively new to public health, it has a good track record; think of the prize that the British government offered to the first person to come up with a way of measuring longitude at sea. It's an approach with two great virtues. First, the buyer—whether a government or a nonprofit organization like the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which might well spend hundreds of millions on any vaccine that's developed—doesn't have to guess which candidates are most likely to succeed. Second, buyers pay only if the vaccine works, so they aren't stuck bankrolling bad ideas.

The logic of the pull strategy in vaccine development—a strategy that has been most cogently advocated by the Harvard economist Michael Kremer, who is the co-author, with Rachel Glennerster, of the new book "Strong Medicine"—seems hard to resist; it's low risk, high reward. But there are powerful forces against it. Politicians prefer push funding because it's an easy way of doling out favors, rewarding supporters, and getting publicity when the lab back home gets a nice grant. Some activists scorn anything that might further enrich drug companies. And the companies themselves—especially big ones—actually like push funding better, too. It assures them a steady flow of R.&D. money, can often be earned via political connections, and isn't tied to performance. Then, there's the ticklish matter of appearances. Drug companies are wary of admitting publicly what everyone knows to be true: that the size of a market affects how much they invest in it.

But pay attention to what companies do, not to what they say. Push funding will continue to be important, especially in subsidizing basic research, but the way to get companies to put resources where they're most needed is to make a concrete, binding promise to buy. All it takes, in the end, is a little pull.

—*James Surowiecki*

CHRISTOPH NIEMANN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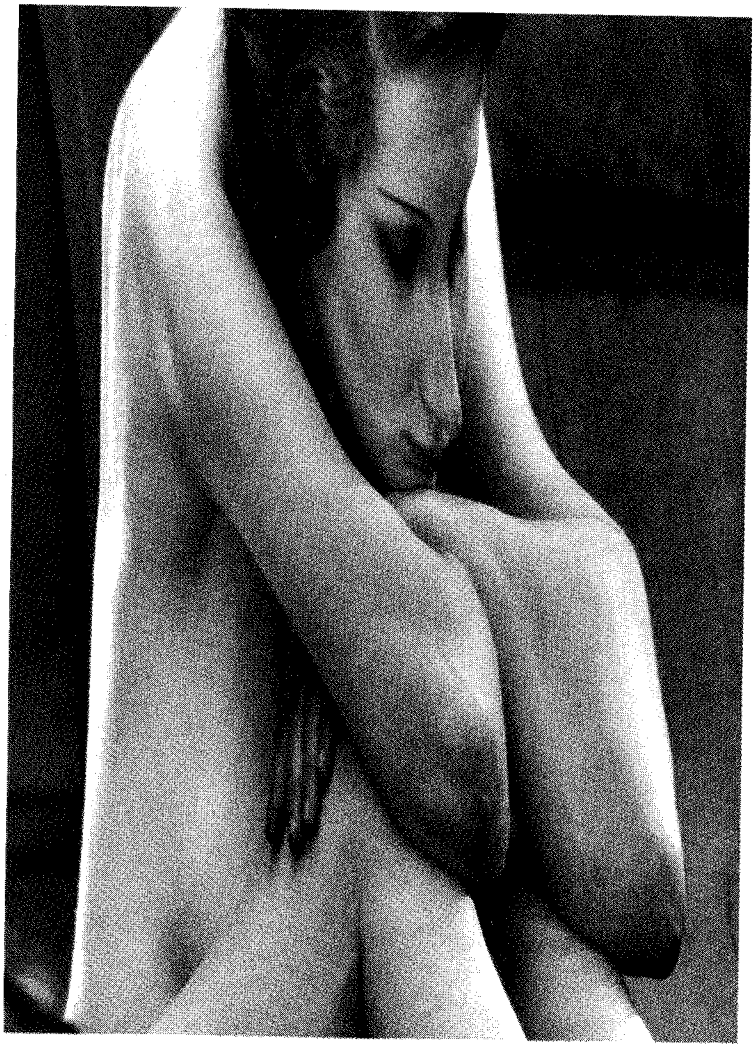
FICTION

THE WOMAN FROM HAMBURG

BY HANNA KRALL



Their home was far away. They were incredibly sociable; they danced throughout Carnival. They liked horse races and gambled enthusiastically, though (of course) in moderation. They were resourceful and thrifty. He was a master painter; he had worked hard and acquired his own firm and three apprentices. Commonplace jobs, like painting walls, he entrusted to his apprentices; sign painting he reserved for himself, especially if the signs included many letters. He was in love with letters. It was their shape that enchanted him. He could spend hours sketching ever more artistic symbols. Sometimes they were sad because they had no children, but they would soon cheer up—they had each other. All of this was a long time ago.

They had turned thirty right before the war broke out.

The war didn't change their life, except that they stopped dancing, and new words appeared on their signs. Now they had orders for warnings. First in Polish: "UWAGA! ZAKAZ WJAZDU!" Then in Russian: "ВНИМАНИЕ! ВЪЕЗД ЗАПРЕЩЁН!" Then in German: "ACHTUNG! EINTRITT VERBOTEN!"

One winter evening, in 1943, he brought home a stranger, a woman.

"This woman is a Jew. We have to help her."

His wife asked if anyone had seen them in the stairwell, and quickly made some sandwiches.

The Jewess was petite, with curly black hair, and although her eyes were blue, she looked very Semitic. They put her in a room with a wardrobe. (Wardrobes and Jews—this is, perhaps, one of the most important symbols of our century. To live in a wardrobe—a human being in a wardrobe. In the middle of the twentieth century. In the heart of Europe.)

The Jewess would go into the wardrobe whenever the doorbell rang, and since her hosts continued to be very sociable, she spent long hours inside it. Fortunately, she was a sensible woman. She never coughed; not even the slightest rustling issued from the wardrobe.

The Jewess was never the first to speak, and she responded to questions with the fewest possible words.

"Yes, I did."

"Attorney."

"In Bełżec."

"We didn't have time to; we got married right before the war."

"They were taken away. I don't know, in Janowska or else in Bełżec."

She did not expect sympathy. On the contrary, she rebuffed it.

"I am alive," she would say. "And I intend to remain alive."

She would watch intently as the wife (whose name was Barbara) ironed or stood beside the stove. Occasionally, she tried to help her, but did so with irritating clumsiness.

She would watch intently as the husband (whose name was Jan) practiced drawing his letters.

Once, she said, "You might practice with something more interesting."

"For example?"

She gave it some thought.

"What about this: 'Once upon a time there lived Elon lanler liron / Elon lanla bibon bon bon . . .' "

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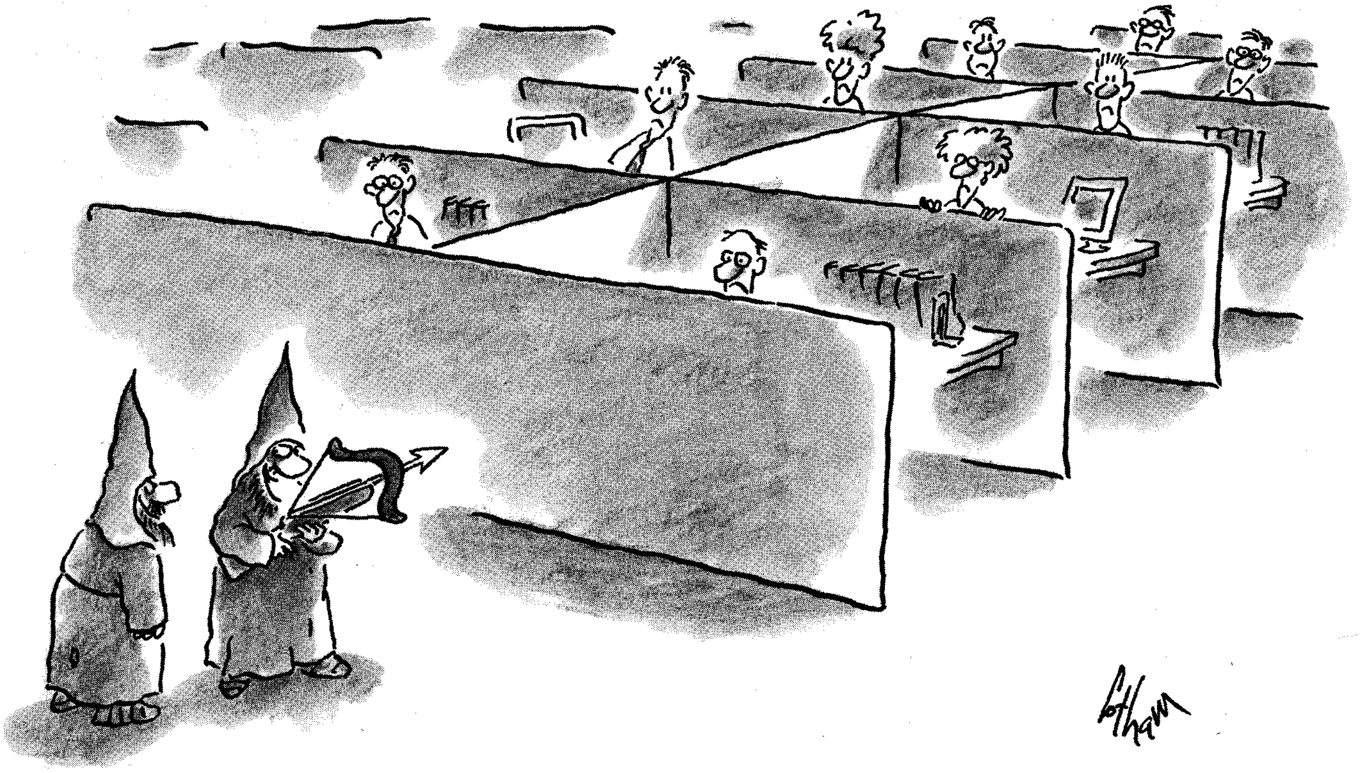


"How many cubicles do you think this will penetrate?"

• •

This was the first time they had heard the Jewess laugh, and they both looked up.

"What's that?" they asked, surprised, and the woman, animated, continued reciting.

"Once upon a time there lived Liron elon lanler / Lanlanler lived in the world."

"Do you see how many splendid letters it contains? It's by Julian Tuwim, 'An Old French Ballad,' " she said.

"Too many 'L's," Jan objected. "But I can write 'Old French.' " And he bent over his sheet of paper.

"Couldn't that Jewess learn to peel potatoes?" his wife asked him that night.

"The Jewess has a name," he replied. "You should refer to her as Regina."

One summer day, the wife came home from shopping. Her husband's jacket was hanging in the anteroom; he had come home from work a little earlier than usual. The door to the Jewess's room was locked.

One autumn day, her husband said, "Regina is pregnant."

Barbara put down her knitting needles and smoothed out her work. It was the sleeve of a sweater, or maybe the back.

"Now, listen to me," her husband whispered. "I don't want any stupid ideas entering your head. Do you hear me?"

She heard him.

"Because if something should happen . . ."

He bent over his wife's head and whispered straight into her ear.

"If something bad should happen to her, the same thing will happen to you. Do you understand me?"

She nodded—she understood him, and she took up her needles.

A couple of weeks later, she entered the Jewess's room and, not saying a word, removed a small pillow from the bed. She undid the seam on one side and shook out a small amount of down. She sewed ribbons onto two sides. She concealed the pillow under her skirt. She tied the ribbons behind her and, for extra measure, secured them with safety pins, then pulled on a second skirt over the first.

A month later, she added some down, and began complaining to her neighbors about her nausea.

Next, she cut a large pillow in half.

As the Jewess's belly grew bigger, the wife enlarged her pillows and let out her skirts—for the Jewess and for herself.

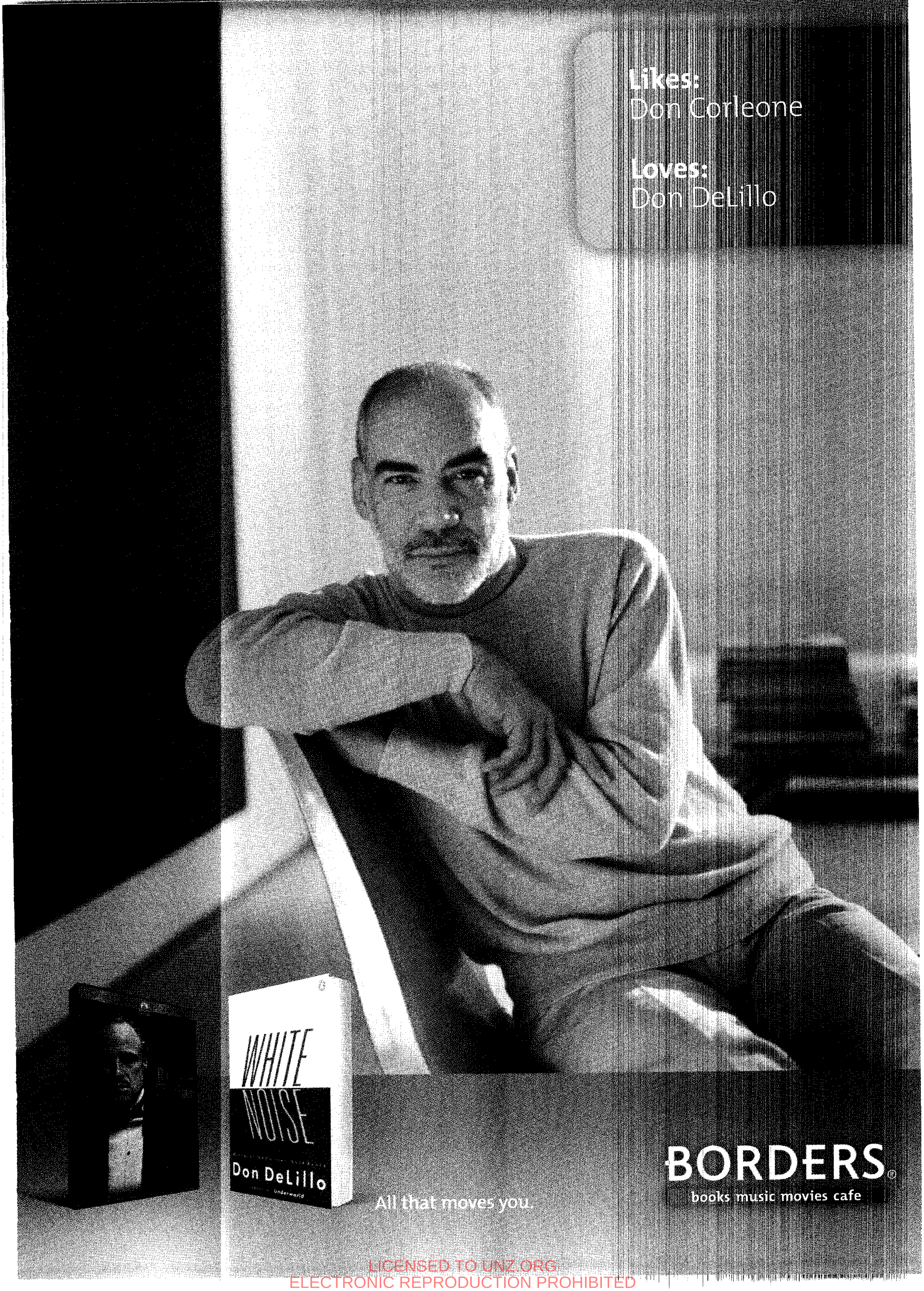
A trusted midwife attended the birth. Fortunately, the labor wasn't long, despite the fact that the Jewess was narrow in the hips and her water had broken the day before.

Barbara took the pillows out from under her skirts and, with the baby in her arms, paid visits to all her neighbors. They kissed her tenderly.

"At last," they said. "It came late in life, but the good Lord had mercy on you."

Filled with happiness and pride, she thanked them.

On May 29, 1944, Barbara and Jan took the baby and went to the parish church with a couple of friends. ("Archdiocese of Lwów, Latin rite, the Parish of St. Mary Magdalene" was inscribed on the certificate signed by Father Szogun and stamped with an oval seal: "Officium Parochia, Leopoli.") That eve-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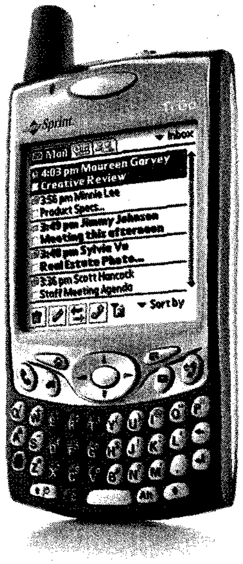

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ning, they held a modest reception. Because of the curfew, the guests stayed until morning. The Jewess spent the entire night in the wardrobe.

On July 27, 1944, the Russians entered the city.

On July 28th, the Jewess disappeared.

The three of them stayed put: Barbara, Jan, and a three-month-old, blue-eyed baby with fine black curls.

They were repatriated to Poland in one of the first transports.

They settled in Częstochowa. One of Regina's prewar acquaintances had told them that she had distant relatives there.

As soon as they entered the apartment, Jan dropped his suitcase, laid the child down, and ran out of the house.

The next day, he went out at dawn.

He searched for her for days on end. He wandered the streets, stopped in at offices, inquired about Jewish apartments, approached people who looked Jewish. He gave up his search only after a visit from two men who introduced themselves as Regina's emissaries. They offered a large sum and asked the couple to give the baby back.

"Our daughter is not for sale," Barbara and Jan said, and saw their guests out.

Their daughter was a well-behaved and very pretty little girl.

Her father spoiled her. They went together to sporting events, to the movies, and to cafés. At home, he would talk about how people admired her beauty, especially her hair, which hung down to her waist and was twisted into French curls.

When Helusia was six, packages began to arrive. They were sent from Hamburg; the sender was a woman with a strange, foreign name.

"She's your godmother," Barbara explained. "I don't wish her an easy death, but write her a letter and thank her nicely."

At first, Helusia dictated her letters; later, she wrote them herself.

"Thank you, dear Aunt, I am doing well at school, I am dreaming about a white sweater, maybe angora, but mohair would be better."

In the next package, a white sweater would arrive.

Helusia was ecstatic, but Barbara sighed and said, "If there is a God, she won't have an easy death. Sit down and write a letter. You can mention your First Communion and that white taffeta would come in handy."

Sometimes there were banknotes in the packages. There were never any letters; just once, between two chocolate bars, there was a photograph. It showed a dark-complexioned woman in a black dress, with a long fox fur draped over her shoulder.

"That's a silver fox," Barbara observed. "She's not very poor."

But they didn't get a good look, because Jan took the photograph out of their hands and hid it somewhere.

Helusia didn't like her father's rapturous moods. They were exhausting. She would be studying or playing with her friends, and he'd be sitting there and looking at her. Then he'd take her face between his hands and look again. And then he would start crying.

He stopped drawing artistic letters.

He began drinking.

He cried more and more often, he drank more and more, and then he died. But before he died, a couple of months before his death, Helusia was leaving for France. She was twenty-five years old. A girlfriend had invited her so that Helusia could calm her frazzled nerves after her recent divorce. Helusia came home one day, radiant, holding a passport in her hand. Her father was drunk. He studied the passport and embraced her.

"Stop over in Germany," he said. "Pay a visit to your mother."

"Your godmother," Barbara corrected him.

"Your mother," her father said again.

"My mother is sitting next to me and smoking a cigarette."

"Your mother lives in Hamburg," her father said, and burst into tears.

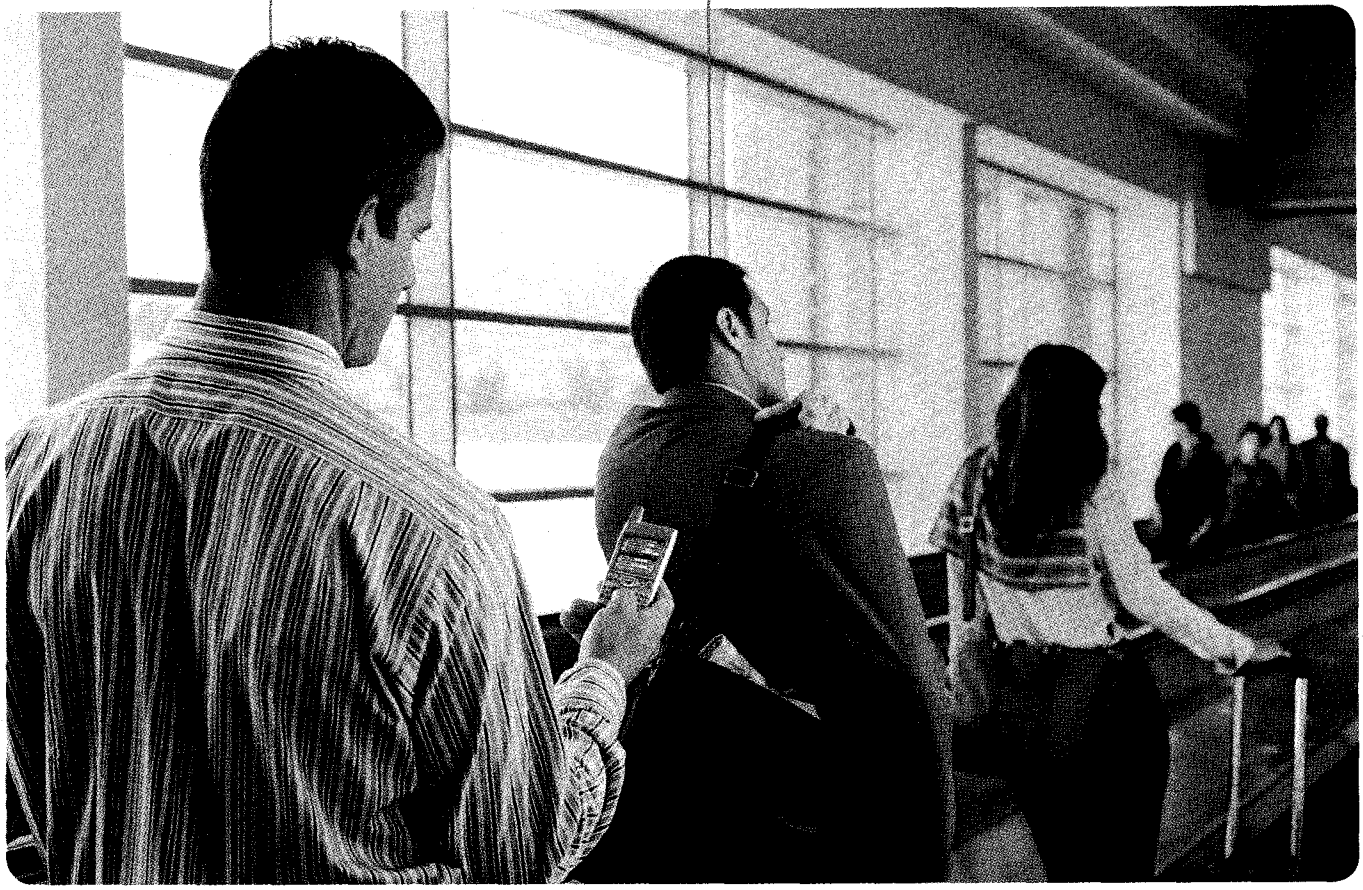
She changed trains in Aachen.

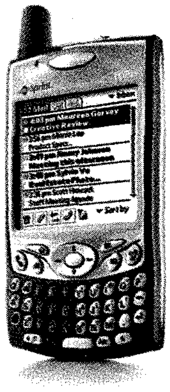
She arrived in Hamburg at seven in the morning. She left her suitcase at the station and purchased a map. She waited in a little square, and at nine she stood in front of the gate of a large house in a quiet, elegant neighborhood. She rang the bell.

"*Wer ist das?*" she was asked from behind the locked door.

Replies to emails, returns call to office and checks game score.

Moves laptop from one shoulder to other.





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"Helusia."

"*Was?*"

"It's Helusia, open up."

The door opened. She saw herself standing there on the threshold: Helusia, but with black hair pinned high on her head, with blue eyes and a too full chin. Helusia, only somehow astonishingly aged.

"Why did you come?" the woman asked.

"To see you."

"Why?"

"I wanted to see my mother."

"Who told you?"

"My father."

A maid brought in tea. They were sitting in the dining room, amid white furniture with tiny painted flowers.

"It's true. I gave birth to you," her mother said. "I had to. I had to agree to everything.

"I wanted to live.

"I don't want to remember your father.

"I don't want to remember those times.

"I don't want to remember you, either."

Her mother paid no attention to Helusia's sobbing, which was growing louder and louder; she just kept repeating the same few sentences over and over.

"I was afraid.

"I had to live.

"You remind me of my fear.

"I don't want to remember.

"Don't ever come here again."

Helusia got married again, to an Austrian—a quiet, rather boring owner of a mountain inn near Innsbruck.

On the anniversary of her father's death, she came back to Poland. She went to the cemetery with her mother. (Barbara was still her mother; she referred to the woman who had given birth to her as "The Woman from Hamburg.")

Over tea, Barbara told her, "When I die, you will find everything in the drawer with the lids."

Helusia bridled at this; then she confessed that she was pregnant and a little afraid of giving birth.

"You have nothing to be afraid of!" Barbara exclaimed. "I was older than you, and even skinnier, and my water broke too early, but I had no trouble giving birth to you."

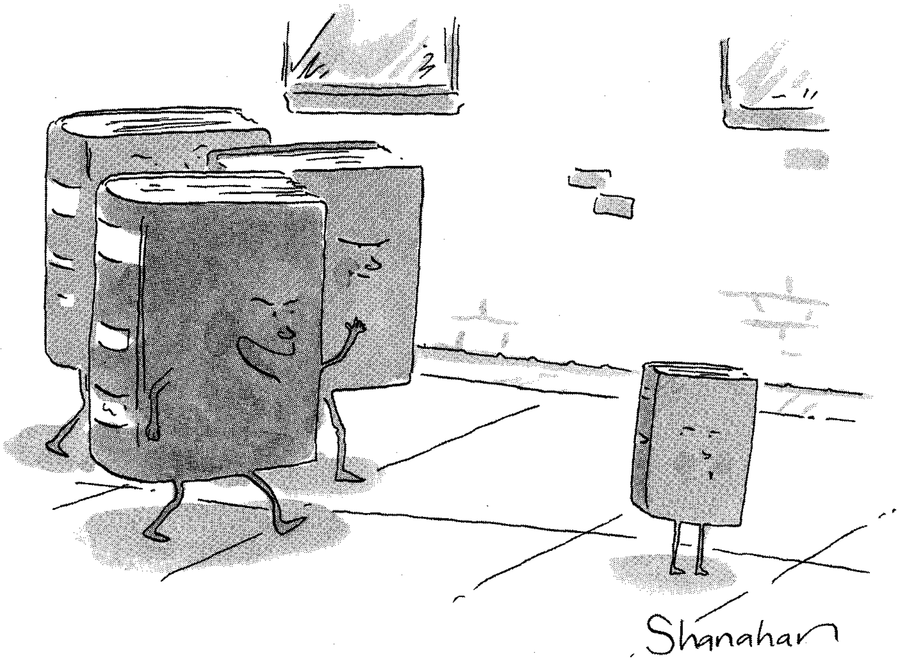
Helusia was terrified, but Barbara was behaving completely normally.

"Should I notify the Woman from Hamburg when the baby is born?"

"Do as you like. That woman caused me a lot of grief, but do as you like."

Barbara grew pensive. "My God, how happy we were without her! How gay! If it weren't for her, we would have been happy for the rest of our lives."

If it weren't for her, you wouldn't have me, Helusia thought, but she could not say this to her mother, who had given birth to her without any difficulty, despite being old and skinny.



"Yo, novella!"

In the drawer that Helusia opened after Barbara's funeral, there were two large envelopes among the pot covers. In one of them was a packet of hundred-mark banknotes. In the other was a notebook divided into two columns: "Date" and "Amount." Barbara had set aside and recorded every banknote that had been sent from Hamburg.

Helusia bought long silver-fox furs with the money. She sewed a black dress to go with them, but it turned out that the fox furs had been poorly prepared, they shed, and they didn't go with black at all.

Several months after her second wedding, she had told her husband about her two mothers. She didn't know German yet. She knew what the word for "wardrobe" was: *Schrank*. "Pillow," *Kissen*, she also knew. "To hide" she found in the dictionary: *verstecken*. "Fear," also in the dictionary: *Angst*.

When she told the story the second time, to her twenty-year-old son, she already knew all the words. Despite this, she was unable to answer several obvious questions: Why didn't Grandma Barbara throw Grandpa out? Why did Grandma Regina run away without you? Does Grandma Regina not love you at all?

"I don't know," she repeated. "How could I know all that?"

"Look in the dictionary," her husband advised her.

Twenty-two years after their first conversation, the Woman from Hamburg invited Helusia to visit her for a couple of days. She showed her old photographs. She played Chopin mazurkas for her on the piano. ("The war interrupted my studies at the conservatory," she said with a sigh.) She recited Tuwim. She talked about men. She had had two husbands after the war who adored her. She hadn't had children.

"And what is your husband like?" she asked.

Helusia confessed that her second marriage was falling apart.

"It's because he bought several hotels. He doesn't come home at night. He said that I should make a new life for myself."

She spoke to her not as to "The Woman from Hamburg" but as to her own mother, and the Woman from Hamburg panicked.

"Don't count on me. Everyone has to survive on his own. One has to be able to survive. I was able to, and you must be able to."

"You survived thanks to my parents," Helusia reminded her.

"Thanks to your mother," the Woman from Hamburg corrected her. "That's the truth; thanks to her alone. All she had to do was open the door and walk a couple of metres. The police station was across the street. It's extraordinary that she didn't open the door. I was amazed that she didn't do it. Did she ever say anything about me?"

"She said that if it weren't for you . . ."

"I had to.

"I wanted to live."

The Woman from Hamburg began to tremble. She repeated, louder and louder, faster and faster, the same sentences:

"I was afraid.

"I had to.

"I wanted to.

"Don't come here."

"What do you really want?" the lawyer she consulted after her return from Hamburg asked. "Do you want her love or her estate? If it's about love, my office doesn't deal with that. If it's about her estate, the matter is no less difficult. First of all, we have to prove that she is your mother. Do you have witnesses? No? Well, then, you see. The testimony of Mrs. Barbara S. should have been recorded. It should have been notarized. Now all that remains is a blood test. Are you determined to sue? So why did you come to a lawyer's office?"

"Then which woman's are you, really? And who are you?" her son asked her.

"I am your mother," she said, although, for effect, she ought to say, "I am the one who survived."

But people respond that way only in modern American novels. ♦

(*Translated, from the Polish, by Madeline G. Levine.*)

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SHOUTS & MURMURS

THE UNDERMINER

BY MIKE ALBO AND VIRGINIA HEFFERNAN

> "My Friend"
>
> My friend must be a bird
> Because it flies.
> Mortal, my friend must be
> Because it dies!
> Barbs has it, like a bee.
> Ah, curious friend.
> Thou puzzlest me.
>
> —*Emily Dickinson*

• *Graduation Day*

Hey, there. Whew, what a day. First I did the Ellipticycle for an hour and then I had to run to the dean's small cocktail party for honors students and then I had to hurry up and turn in that Green Form so I could graduate.

You know, the Green Form.

The Green Form? You didn't turn it in?! No, it's that green form that we got at orientation when we first came here, four years ago. Yeah, sorry, but it kind of *is* important. It's the Green Form. They told us never to lose it, remember? No, not the blue registration card, the *green* form! Maybe you just put it in your wallet and you didn't even know or something. Check it.

Wow . . . your wallet. You actually keep everything all crammed in together like that? No, it's just kind of amazing. I would freak out if I couldn't streamline my wallet. Oh—I think you dropped this twenty-dollar bill. Oh, no, wait, it's actually mine. Sorry.

You are so funny, you. Man, am I going to miss college and all your crazy flakiness. Ha ha! You've always been the funny, crazy one in our gang. With all your plans and your spilling wallet and your poetry writing and music and acting and whatever you have going on at the time! You're like the outsider of the gang. Not *outsider* outsider. But I mean, like, like outsider art. You know, like cute, sweet, drunk, weird. Like those artists who build towers in their back yards out of, like, TV-dinner trays, or who scratch the entire Bible into a bar of soap with their fingernails and end up in mental institutions. I mean, like not obviously insane but more like all your efforts may not be fully embraced by the public, but you're gonna just do it anyway, no matter what. And that's just great.

Well, anyway. You majored in Kurdish folklore, right? Wow. I was so surprised you didn't get honors, since you tried so hard to be schmoozy with your adviser—I mean, I'm sure that's probably a good strategy. That's the way you get ahead in this dog-eat-dog world.

So what are you doing this summer? You got a job as an intern? Cool beans! Where? An art gallery in New York! Bonwyck Gallery? Weird! Did they expand their program? I thought it was just for teens. No, I'm sure I'm wrong.

And after that—any life plan? Nothing yet? Yeah, I know. It's so hard to choose the right path. It's, like, one false move and you may end up leading an entirely different life, full of flaws and mishaps. Huh.

• *Open-Mike Night, Kafka-fé Coffee House*

Oh, my God, I am so glad I got a chance to see your band perform. Wow, that was fun! That was just fun! Really fun! I got here right at the end, but I pretty much caught enough to understand your whole deal. Sorry the crowd was so small. . . . But they were all clapping. You really got a lot of applause. Did you have a lot of family and friends in the audience? It just seemed like everyone knew you or something. Oh, you wait tables here, too? I guess that internship ended, huh? Well, cool for you. At least the staff here is supportive. The way they clapped for you. Wow, that was fun!

Look at you and your outfit! That is a super pair of retro moon boots. They're the trend right now, I know. Trends are so interesting to follow, especially for someone cutting-edge like you who's so hyper-attuned to the whole "appearance industry." The way you keep up with things, and spend your money on magazines. Like, I know that, for you, you need to be really good about skin care.

Unbelievable. Your singing voice is so different from your appearance. It's, like, when I close my eyes I would imagine the person singing was a sultry, sexy vocalist from prewar Berlin, and then I open my eyes and there you are! You and your big shiny American face!

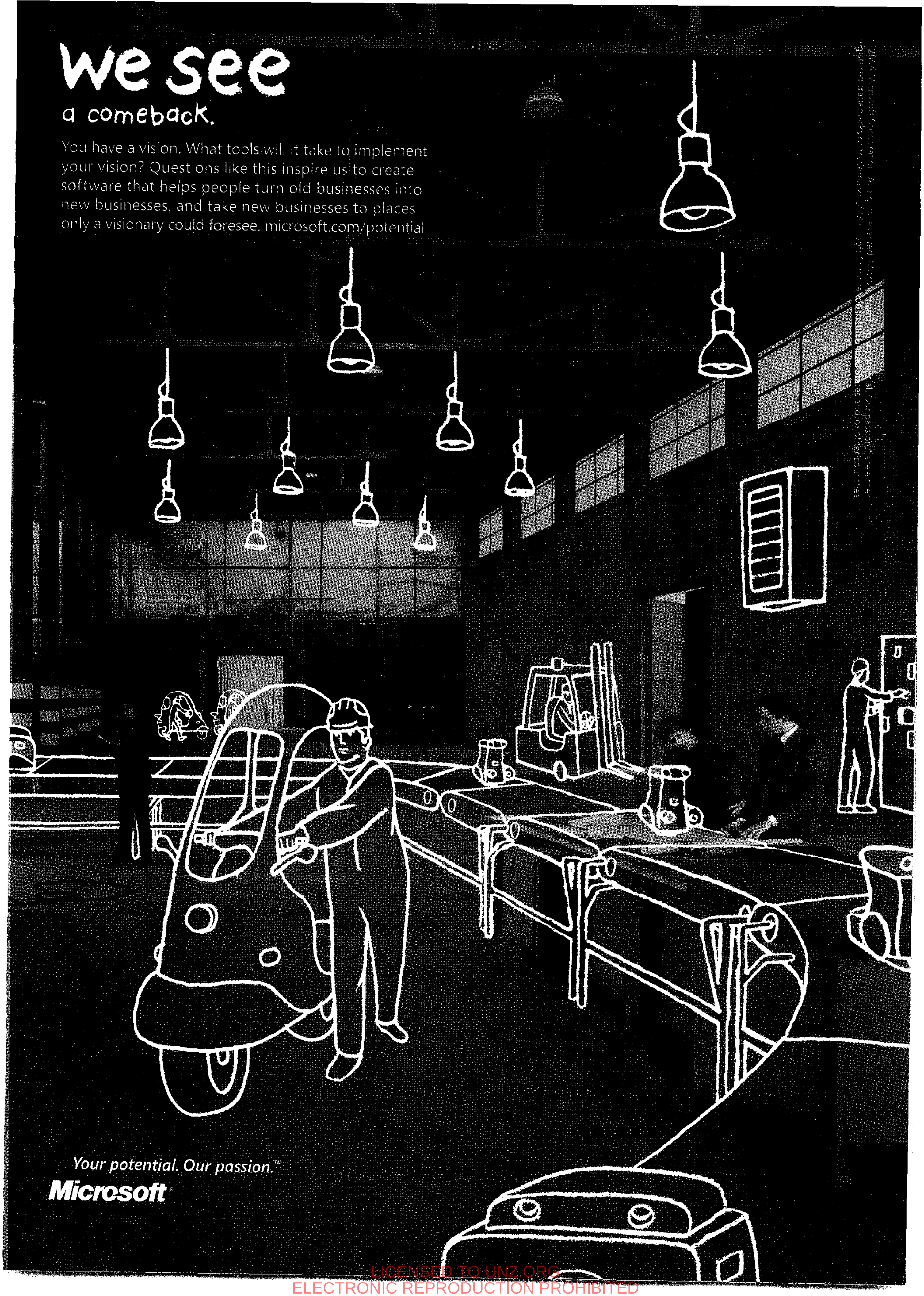
So are you still with Carl from college? That is so sweet that you guys are trying to work things out. Long-distance, right? Yeah. Sometimes those actually work. No, really! Sometimes they really do! Sometimes! How fun! Really fun!

Well, anyway, what are you doing later? Oh, yeah, I guess you have to clean up here. Send steamed water through the cappuccino machines and wipe out the coffee thermoses and stuff. Wow, I totally remember having to do that in my job after high school! It was better since I did it in Rome, but still.

Me? I'm going to Crish Crash, probably. Crish Crash? You know, the huge, huge warehouse party that's happening tonight. It's probably why there wasn't much of a crowd here—like, everyone in the city under twenty-five is going. This artist friend is meeting me. He's scouting for models for his photo series. I know you sort of have contempt for institutions, but RISD was good to him.

No, I mean, you said that once. Like, when you didn't get in. Whatever.

Crish Crash. You haven't heard about it? Weird. Yeah, you kind of have to know how to find it. And sort of know the right way to ask. Wait. Here's the address. If someone stops you at the door, just act like you know some-



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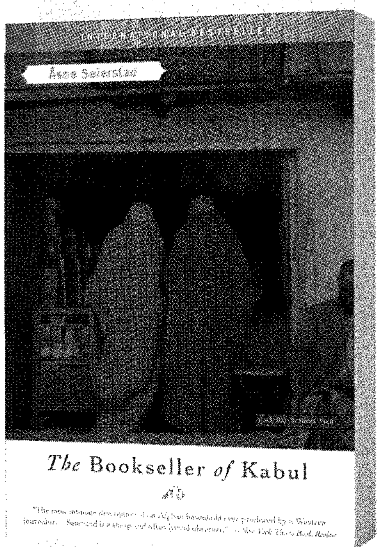

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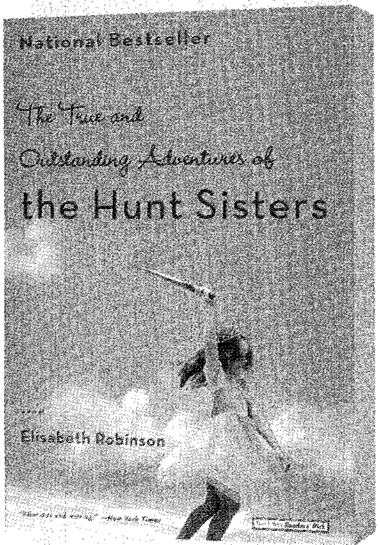

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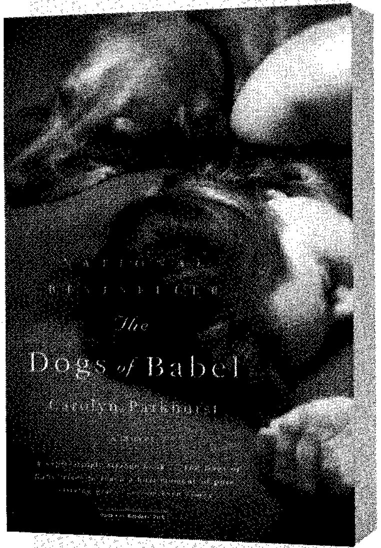

"Wonderful." —WASHINGTON POST BOOK WORLD

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one—that's what a lot of people who show up uninvited do.

• *At a French bistro*

You're here early! Wait. Are you sick? You look sort of tired. Oh, you went out drinking last night? It's so great how you can still do those college things. You're so crazy!

Did you throw up? No, no, I just smelled throw-up for a second.

You're having a Bloody Mary? No. I'm not drinking anymore. I'll just have a peppermint tea. No, go ahead and go for it. Don't let me stop you. I've just realized there's a little more to life. But go ahead, have fun. You're so crazy!

So I have some huge news. I didn't want you to hear it from someone else, but guess what? I just made two million dollars from my book deal. Yeah, yeah. I'm pretty happy about it, and my agent's pretty happy about it, and I can't talk about the details of the deal, but if you could just do me a huge, huge favor and just don't mention it to anyone? I know how you kind of have a problem keeping secrets! No, just joking. I'm joking, I'm joking. You do, though!

• *Outside a night club called Hush*

Excuse me? I'm sorry, but this is a private party and—

Oh, my God. Hi! I didn't recognize you. Jeez, you look so different! Jesus Christ! This is insane! I can't believe how different you look! Did you get a haircut? No? It just seems fluffier or something. Hmm? No, I don't wash my hair anymore. I just rinse it. At first it was dirty, but then it became cleaner than if you use shampoo, because, if you think that shampoo cleans your hair, it doesn't. It's full of chemicals and detergents that permanently strip your hair of important oils and then in a few years you experience aggressive balding.

So you came all dressed up for the movie-première party! That's so cute, because if you knew this scene you'd always really dress down. But we're probably just jaded.

Are you here alone? Trawling around the film scene, huh? Right, right. Trolling around the film scene. Yeah, everyone is still clamoring for a part of the indie-film pie. This is sort of a weird party for that, but . . . you know, maybe you'll get a chance to show off a script to some hungry producer, or at least sleep with one! Ha! You crazy, funny weirdo!

. . . So you're still here. I would have thought you'd left by now. I mean the party, not the city. Were you invited to the screening, or just the after-party? Oh. Well. By the way, how is Carl?

You did?

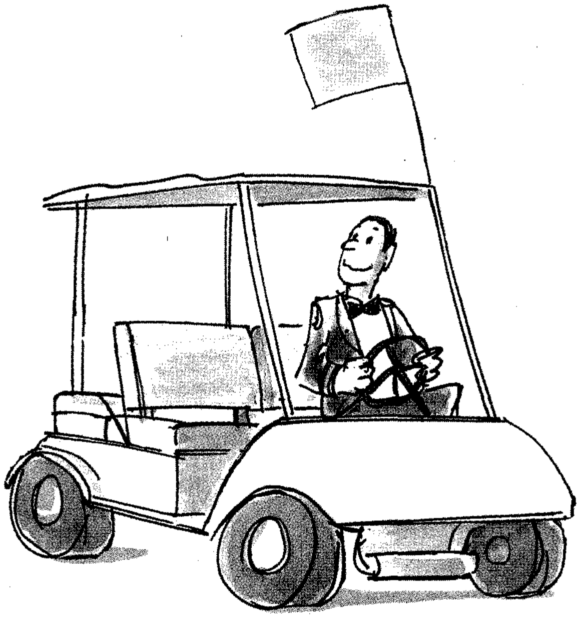
Oh, wow. I'm sorry you're dealing with that. I sort of saw that coming. Anyway, sweetie, really? That must be such a world of hurt for you. Who are you hanging out with now? Do you still see that girl who is my friend Amy's assistant?

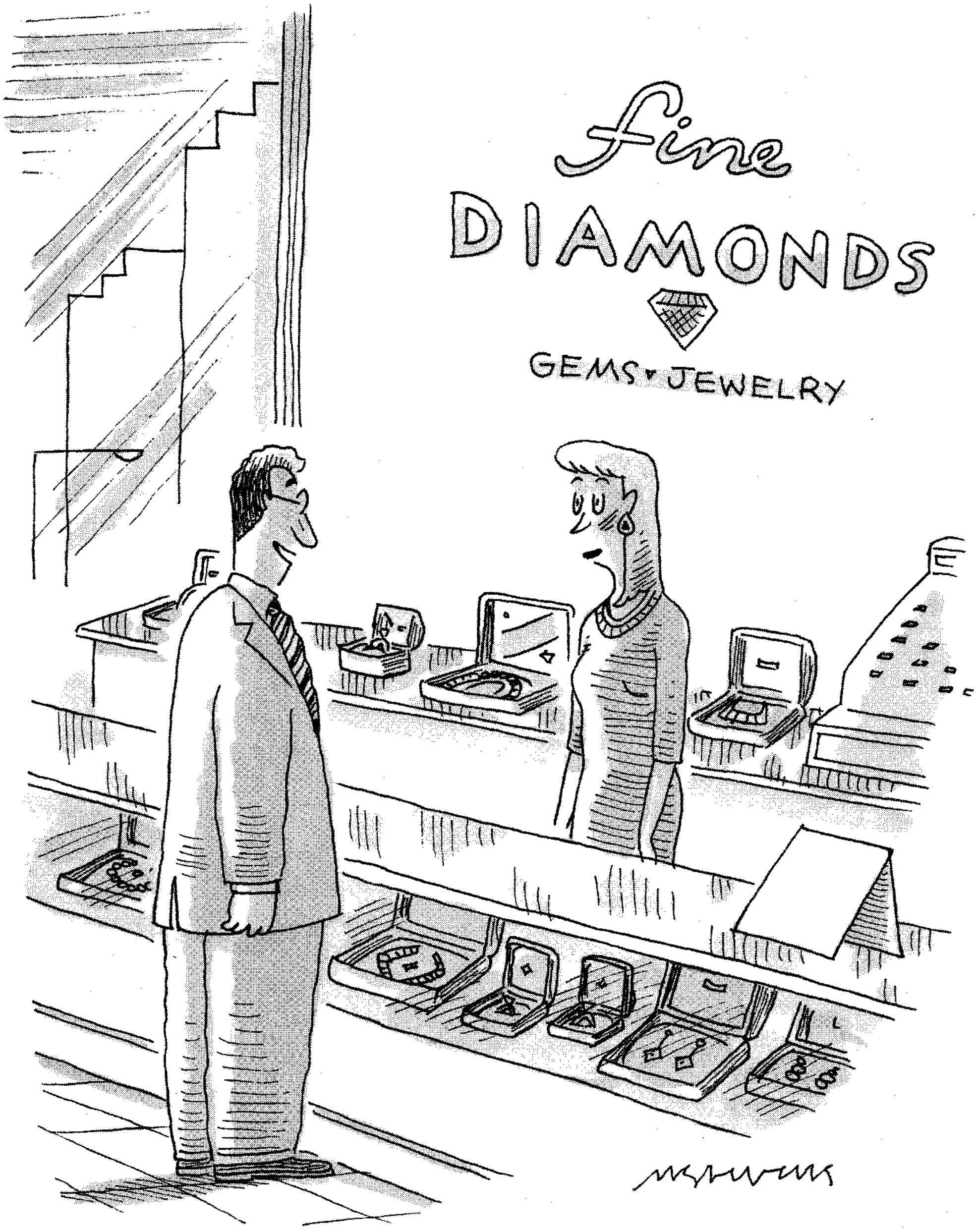
You're taking a trip? Trajanja? Yes, of course I've heard of it! The small communal hard-to-get-to island off the coast of Belize? I went there last spring. It'll be good for you. I'm sure you got your shots. Oh. You didn't? Wow, I wish we'd talked before. I'm sorry, but, yes, those shots are kind of important. Without them you have a really high risk of developing a lot of long-term stomach problems and you don't really get to leave your room. Yeah, you could try to get them today, I guess. I mean, apparently they don't really "kick in" for, like, a week, but . . . yeah, you could try. Maybe they've made some medical advances since last spring.

Hey, it looks like they're opening the party to the general public. You could check it out! It'll be crowded, but, you know, you may as well just check out the whole deal.

Listen, I'm doing a ten-mile bike ride in the morning and I have to get to bed, but you take care of yourself, O.K.? Maybe you shouldn't go in. Save your energy for your trip. Don't go slutting around all night. Go home and take care of yourself. I worry about you, you crazy thing. ♦

THE FUNNY PAGES

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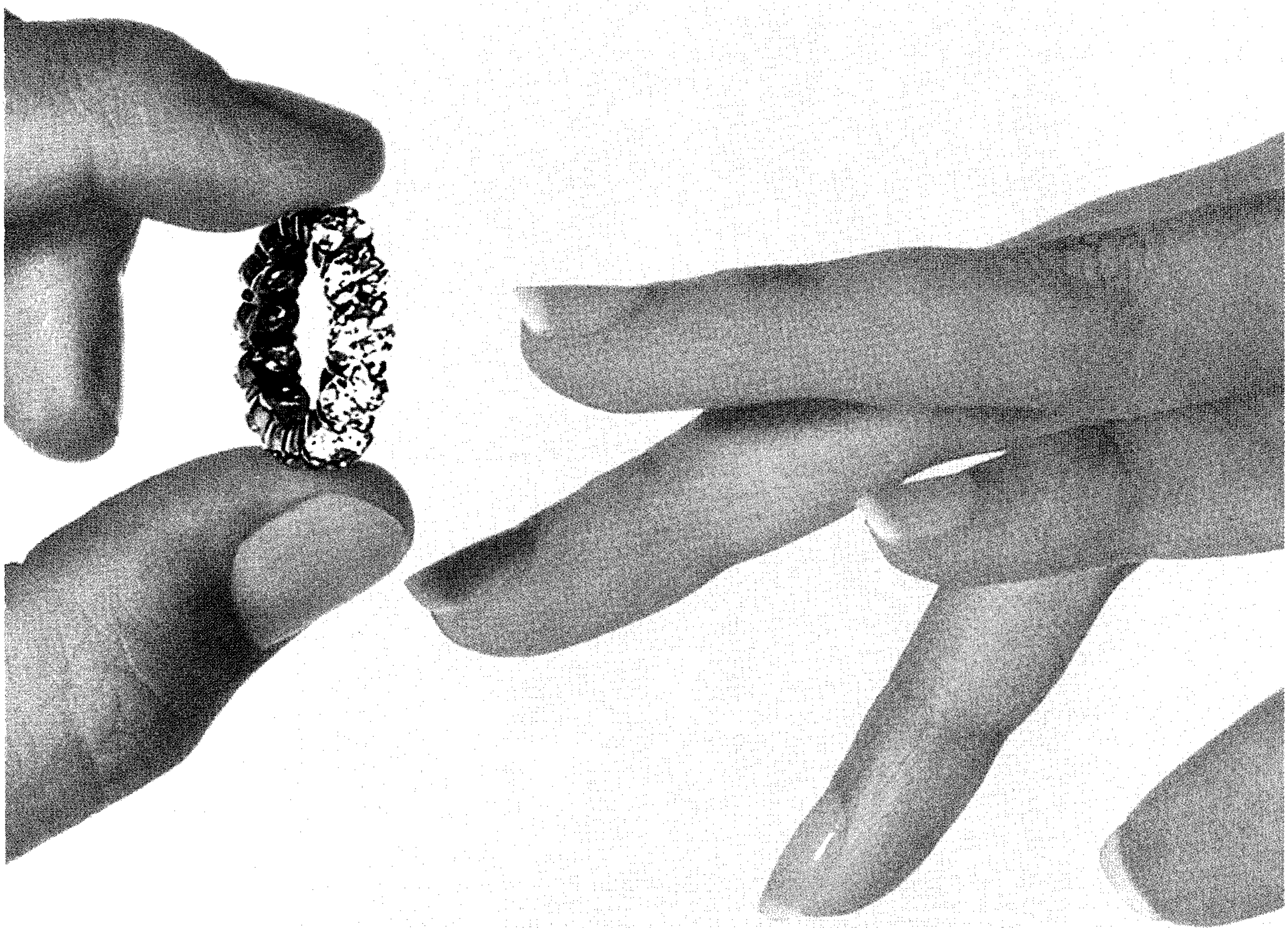

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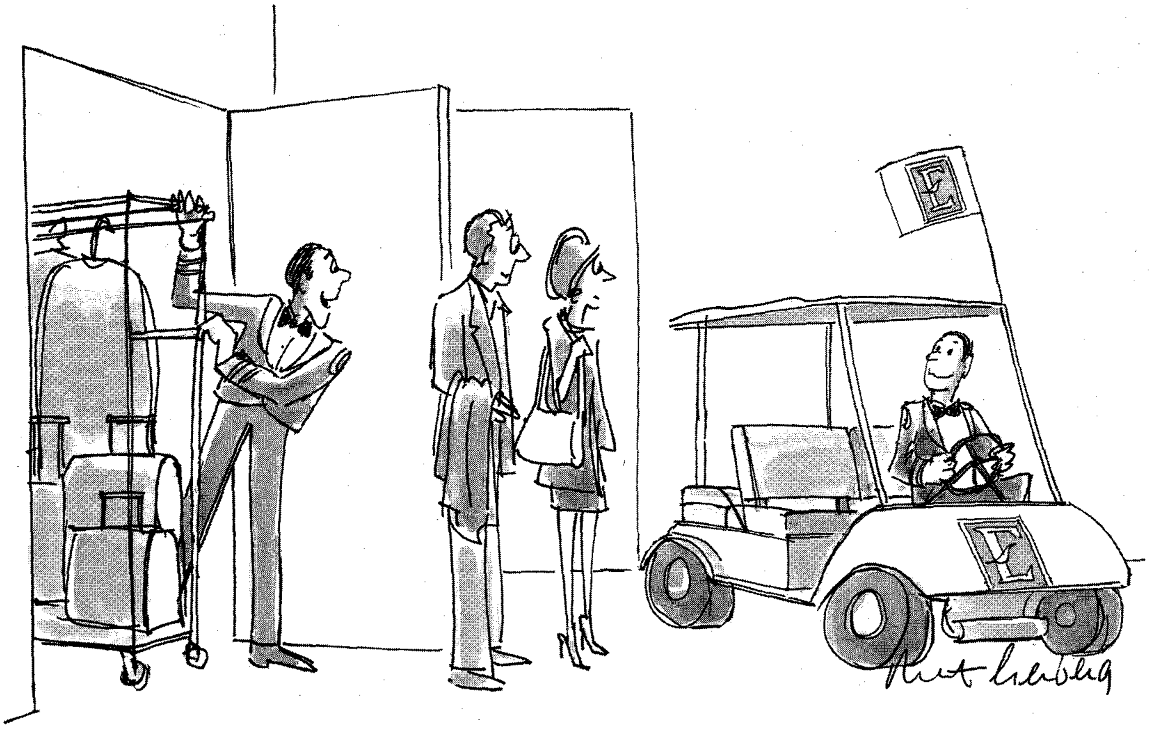

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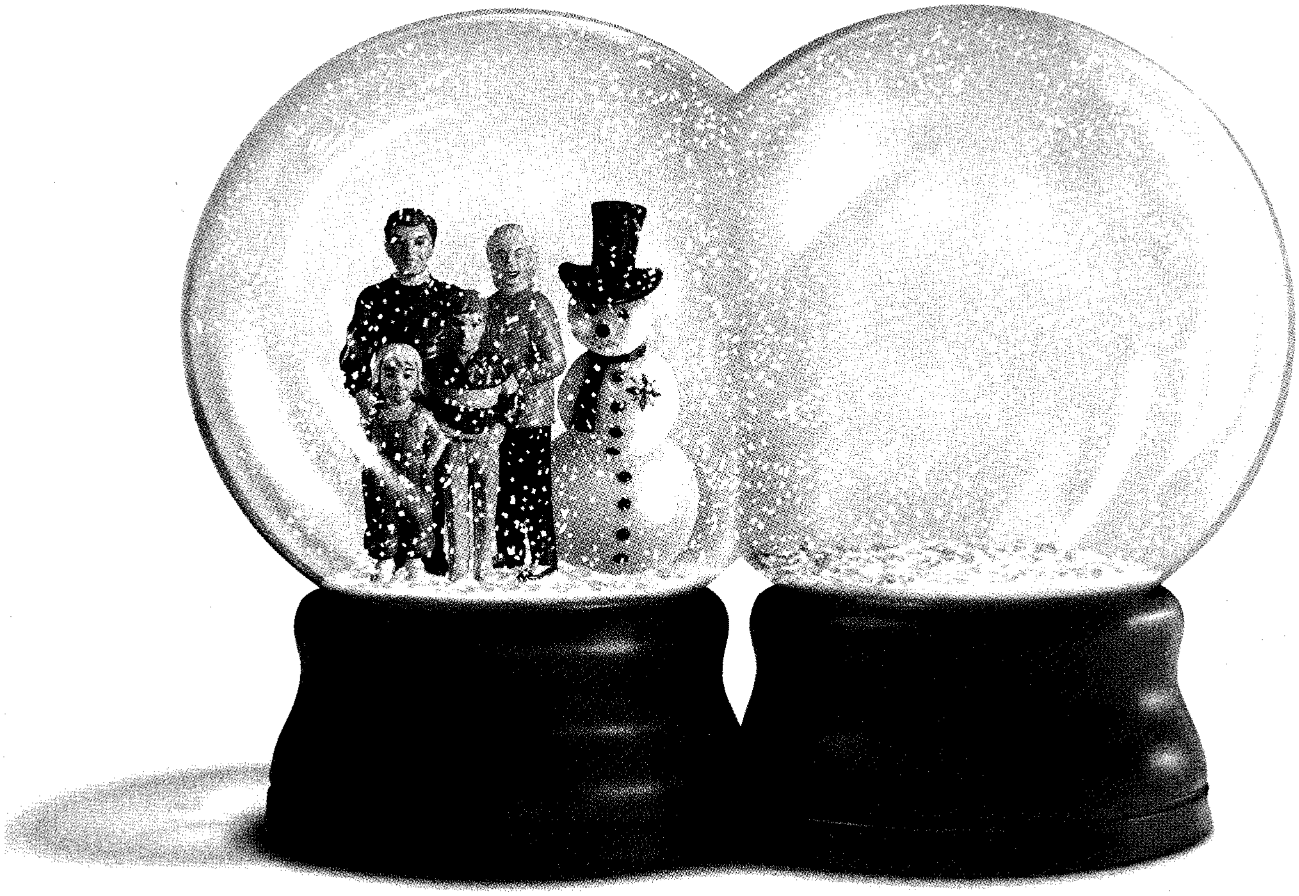

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PERSONAL HISTORY

THE MISTRESS'S DAUGHTER

Meeting the parents.

BY A. M. HOMES

JOHN RITTER

Christmas, 1992, I go home to Washington, D.C., to visit my family. The night I arrive, just after dinner, my mother says, "Come into the living room. Sit down. We have something to tell you." Her tone makes me nervous. My parents are not formal people—no one sits in the living room. I am standing in the kitchen. The dog is looking up at me.

"Come into the living room. Sit down," my mother says.

"Why?"

"There's something we need to talk to you about."

"What?"

"Come and we'll tell you."

"Just tell me now, from here."

"Come," she says, patting the cushion next to her.

"Who died?" I say, terrified.

"No one died. Everyone's fine."

"Then what is it?"

They are silent.

"Is it about me?"

"Yes, it's you. We've had a phone call. Someone is looking for you."

Silence.

After a lifetime spent in a virtual witness-protection program, I've been exposed. I grew up knowing one thing about myself: I am the mistress's daughter. My birth mother was young and single, my father older and married, with children of his own. When I was born, in December of 1961, a lawyer called my adoptive parents and said, "Your package has arrived, and it's wrapped in pink ribbons."

My mother starts to cry. "You don't have to do anything about it—you can just let it go," she says, trying to relieve me of the burden. "But the lawyer said he'd be happy to talk with you. He couldn't have been nicer."

"Is he sure she's the right woman?"

"I think he's fairly certain that it's her. Do you want her name?"

I shake my head. "Where does she live?"

"New Jersey."

In my dreams, my birth mother has always been a goddess—the queen of queens, the C.E.O., the C.F.O., and the C.O.O. Movie-star beautiful, extraordinarily competent, she can take care of anyone and anything. She has made a fabulous life for herself as ruler of the world, except for one missing link—*me*.

In the morning, my mother comes into my room with a scrap of paper; she sits on the edge of my bed and asks me again, "Do you want the name?"

I don't answer.

"It's the same name as a friend of yours," she says, as if trying to warm it up, make it more palatable.

"You can just leave it on the desk," I say.

Her name is Helene. (I have changed some names and locations to protect privacy.)

I call the lawyer. "I'd like a letter," I say. "I want information: where she grew up, how educated she is, what she does for a living, what the family medical history is, and what the circumstances of my adoption were."

I am asking for the story of my life. There is an urgency to my request; I feel I have to hurry and ask everything I want to know. As suddenly as she has arrived, she could be gone again.

Ten days later, her letter arrives with no fanfare. The postman doesn't come running down the street, screaming, "It's here, it's here! Your identity has arrived." It comes in an envelope from the lawyer's office, with a scrawled note apologizing for not having got it to me sooner. It's clear that the letter has been opened by the lawyer, presumably read. Why? I am annoyed but don't say anything. I don't feel I have the right. This is one of the pathological complications of adoption—adoptees don't really have

"How much of a gratuity does Santa usually get?"

rights, their lives are about supporting the secrets, the needs, and the desires of others.

The letter is typed on Helene's stationery, simple small gray sheets of paper, her name embossed across the top. Her language is oddly formal, less than artful, grammatically flawed. I read it simultaneously fast and slowly, wanting to take it in, unable to take it in. I read it and then read it again. What is she telling me?

> At the time I was carrying this little girl it was not proper for a girl to have a child out of wedlock. This was probably the most difficult decision of my entire life to make. I was 22 years old and very naïve. I was raised very sheltered and very strict by my mother.
>
> I remember being in the hospital with her and dressing her the day we both left the hospital. I have never forgotten the beautiful black hair and the blue eyes and the little dimples in her face. As I left the hospital with the lady who was picking up the little girl, I can still see myself in the taxi and her asking me to give her the baby. I did not want to give her the child, however I did realize, I did not have the wearwithall to take care of her myself. Yes, I have always loved this little girl and been tortured every December of my life from the day she was born that I did not have her with me.

She writes that watching television shows like "Oprah" and "Maury" gave her the courage and the confidence to come forward. She lists the facts of where she was born, what street she lived on as a child, how she grew up. She includes the names of her parents and when they died. She says how tall she is and how much she weighs.

Each bit of information swims through me, then takes root, digging in. There are no filters; there are no screens. I have no protection from this.

She closes her letter by saying, "I have never married, I have always felt guilty about giving this little girl away."

I call the lawyer and ask for another letter, with more information, a medical history, a more detailed explanation of what happened, what she's been doing since, and a photograph of her.

A day later, in a panic, I call the lawyer again. "Oh," I say, "I forgot. Could you ask her who the father is?" Not *my* father but *the* father. "What is his name?"

Within days, a second letter arrives.

> I suppose now, I should tell you about Stan. This is difficult for me because to me it is turning back the hands of time. I went to work for Stan at his shop in downtown Washington D.C. when I was 15 years old. I worked for him on Thursday night and on Saturdays. During the summer, I worked full-time. Stan as you know was much older than I. He was very nice to me. This relationship started very innocently. He would offer to drive me home and we would talk about many things on the way. Then one day while we were working he asked me if I would like to go to dinner with him. This was the beginning. At age 17, he called my mother and asked if he could marry me. My mother said, "she is too young." Hung up the telephone, turned to me and said, I do not want you to see this man ever again. At this time, I was in love and nothing she said would stop me. I have always been a very determined person. Stubborn if you will. This is me.
>
> Stan is married at that time and promises to get a divorce and marry me. This was not my idea, but his. Time goes on, I become pregnant with the young lady. He thinks I should go to Florida, says he will buy a house for the both of us. About three months later, I am very unhappy, I return to Washington. Stan and I start to have disagreements.
>
> During the last three months of the pregnancy I stayed with my mother in Virginia where her home was. Shortly before the baby was born, Stan again said he would marry me. He asked if he could come and pick me up and take me to buy things for the baby. I told him no. I did not call him when the baby was born.
>
> To the best of my knowledge he lives in Virginia. He has four children. All of his children were born prior to the birth of our child. He was an all American Football Player. To the best of my knowledge his father was Jewish, his mother Irish. I knew only his mother. She was a little, chubby lady. Very kind and very nice to me.
>
> You asked about my general health. I periodically do have a problem with bronchitis. This is treated with medicine. Damp weather is not for me. I do take pills for high blood pressure. Other than that, I am fine. I am nearsighted and do have soft teeth. Both inherited, my eyes from my father, my teeth from my mother.

She ends her second letter: "I have a great fear of being disappointed with what I am now doing."

I follow up with a call. Her voice is low, nasal, gravelly, vaguely animal. I tell her who I am and she screams, "Oh, my God! This is the most wonderful day of my life." Her voice, her emotion, comes in bursts, like punctuation—I can't tell if she is laughing or crying.

The phone call is thrilling, flirty, like a first date, like the beginning of something. There is a rush of curiosity, the desire to know everything at once. What is your life like? How do your days begin and end? What do you do for fun? Why did you come looking for me? What do you want?

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something. I am like a recovering amnesiac. Things I know about myself, things that exist without language—my hardware, my mental firing patterns, parts of me that are fundamentally, inexorably me—are being echoed on the other end, confirmed as a DNA match. It is not an entirely comfortable sensation.

"Tell me about you—who are you?" she asks.

I tell her that I live in New York. I am a writer. I have a dog. No more or less.

She tells me that she loves New York, that her father used to go to the city and always brought back presents from F.A.O. Schwarz. She tells me how much she loved her father, who died of a heart attack when she was seven, because "he liked rich food."

This causes an immediate pain in my chest: I now have to be careful; I could die of a heart attack early in life.

She goes on, "I come from a very strange family. We're not quite right."

"What do you mean 'strange'?" I ask.

She tells me about her mother dying of a stroke a couple of years earlier. She tells me about her own life falling apart, how she moved from Washington to Atlantic City. She says that after she gave birth to me her mother wouldn't come to the hospital to pick her up. She had to take the bus home. She tells me that it took all her strength and courage to come looking for me.

And then she says, "Have you heard from your father?" (When the lawyer opened the second letter, he saw my father's name and called Helene: "If you're going to pass on this information, you'd better contact him and tell him what you've done.")

"It would be nice if the three of us could get together," she says. "We could all come to New York and have dinner."

She wants everything all at once, and it is too much for me. There is a deep fracture in my thoughts, a refrain constantly echoing: I am not who I thought I was and yet I have no idea who I am.

I am not who I thought I was, and neither is she the queen of queens I imagined.

"I can't see you yet," I say.

"When can we talk again?" she asks as we are hanging up. "Will you call again soon? I love you. I love you so much."

ABC

I'll never find out now
what A. thought of me.
If B. ever forgave me in the end.
Why C. pretended everything was fine.
What part D. played in E.'s silence.
What F. had been expecting, if anything.
Why G. forgot when she knew perfectly well.
What H. had to hide.
What I. wanted to add.
If my being around
meant anything
to J. and K. and the rest of the alphabet.

—*Wislawa Szymborska*

(Translated, from the Polish, by Stanislaw Baranczak and Clare Cavanagh.)

Our conversations are frequent—I call her a couple of times a week, but I do not give her my phone number. The calls are seductive, addictive, punishing. Each one shakes me; each requires a period of recovery. Every time I tell her something, she takes the information and holds it too close, reinventing it and delivering it back to me in a manner that leaves me wanting her to know nothing.

She tells me that she never got along with her stepfather and that her mother was cold and cruel. I feel that there's more to the story than she's telling me, that something was happening at home involving the stepfather, and that the mother knew and blamed her for it—which would explain the animosity between them, and also why Helene, a young girl, was so easily propelled into the arms of a much older, married man. I never ask her the question directly. It seems intrusive; her need to protect herself is stronger than my need to know. Her lack of sophistication leaves me unsure whether she's of limited intelligence or simply shockingly naïve.

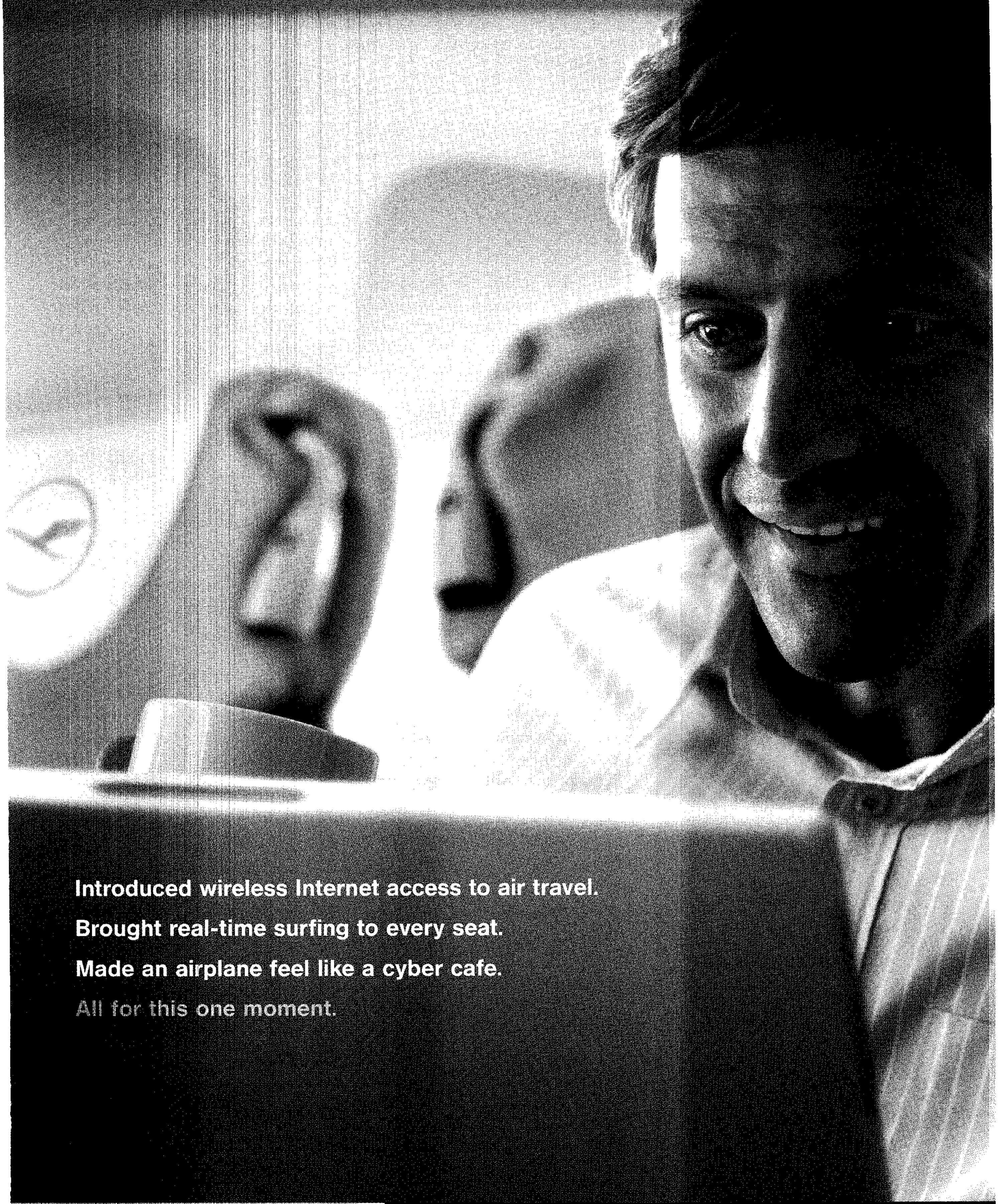
"Did you think of having an abortion?"

"The thought never occurred to me. I couldn't have."

Pregnancy, I gather, was a way out of her mother's house and into my father's life. It must have seemed like a good idea, until my father refused to leave his wife. He tried. They got an apartment together; for four days, he lived with Helene. Then he went back, claiming that "his children missed him." Helene had him arrested, under an old Maryland ordinance for desertion. At the time, his wife was also pregnant, with a child who was born four months before I was.

"At one point, he told me to meet him at his lawyer's office, so that we could figure out a way to 'take care of everything,' " she says. "I sat down with him and his lawyer and the lawyer drew a diagram and said, 'There's a pie and there are only so many slices of the pie and that's all there is and it's got to go around.' 'I am not a slice of pie,' I said, and walked out. I have never been so angry in my life. Slices of pie. I told my friend Estelle I was expecting a baby and didn't know what to do. She told me she knew someone who wanted to adopt a baby. I told her the baby must go to a Jewish family who would treat her well. I couldn't take care of you myself—young ladies didn't have babies on their own."

She interrupts herself. "Do you think one day we might have a portrait painted of the two of us?" Her request comes from another world, another life. What would she do with a portrait? Hang it over her fireplace in Atlantic City? Send it to my father for Christmas? She is living in stopped time, filled with fantasies of what might have been. After thirty-



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one years, she has returned to reclaim the life she never had.

"I have to go," I say. "I'm late for a dinner."

"O.K.," she says, "but, before you go out, put on your cashmere sweater so you don't get chilly."

I don't have a cashmere sweater.

"We'll talk again soon," I say and hang up.

I am losing myself. On the street, I see people who look alike—families where each face is a nuanced version of the others. I watch how they stand, how they walk and talk, variations on a theme.

A few days later, I try Helene again.

In the background, there is a flick, a sharp suck of air—she is smoking.

"Why won't you see me?" she whines. "You're torturing me. You take better care of your dog than you take of me."

Am I supposed to be taking care of her? I wonder.

"Don't be angry with me forever," she says. "If I'd known where you were, I would have come and taken you away."

Imagine that—kidnapped by your own mother, the same mother who gave you away at birth. For years, Helene lived less than two miles from the house I grew up in, not knowing who and where I was.

"I'm not angry with you," I tell her, and it is true. I am horrified at the way I see myself in her—the loose screw is not entirely unfamiliar—and appalled that in the end I may end up rejecting the one person I never had any intention of rejecting. But not angry. Not unforgiving. The more Helene and I talk, the happier I am that she gave me up. I can't imagine having grown up with her. I would not have survived.

"I'm surprised your father hasn't been in touch," she says.

It occurs to me that "my father" may be having the same reaction to her that I'm having, that he equates me with her, and that that may be one of the reasons he's keeping his distance. It also occurs to me that he may think that she and I are somehow in this together, conspiring to get something from him.

I write him a letter of my own, telling him how surprised I was by Helene's appearance, and suggesting that although this is something that neither he nor I asked for, we try to deal with things with some small measure of grace. I tell him a little bit about myself. I give him my name and a way of contacting me.

I go to the gym. Overhead, there is a bank of televisions—CNN, MTV, and the Cartoon Network. I am watching a cartoon in which a basket containing a baby bird is left outside a wooden door carved into the base of a tree. The words "Knock, Knock" appear on the screen. A large rooster opens the door and picks up the basket. A note is pinned to the fabric covering the basket:

> Dear Lady,
> Please take care of my little one.
> Signed,
> Big One

The rooster looks inside, and a small but feisty baby bird pokes up. The rooster gets excited. An image of the baby bird in a frying pan dances in the rooster's head. A chicken wearing a bonnet comes into the house and shoos the rooster away. The rooster is disappointed. I am on the treadmill, in tears.

There is a message on my machine, the voice raspy, coarse: "Your cover is blown. I know who you are and I know where you live. I'm reading your books."

I dial her immediately. "Helene, what are you doing?"

"I found out who you are, A. M. Homes. I'm reading your books."

It is the only time in my life that I regret being a writer. She has something of mine, and she thinks she has me.

"How did you get my number?"

"I'm very clever. I called all the bookstores in Washington and asked them, 'Who is a writer from Washington whose first name is Amy?' At first, I thought you were someone else, some other Amy, who wrote a book about God, and then one of the stores helped me and gave me your number."

She stalks me. Every time the phone rings, every time I call in for messages, I brace myself.

"Do you live with someone on Charles Street? Is he there? Does he not like it when I call?"

"How do you know I live on Charles Street?"

"I'm a good detective."

"Helene, I find this very upsetting. How do you know where I live?"

"I don't have to tell you," she says.

"Then I don't have to continue this conversation," I say.

"Why won't you see me? Do I have to come up there and find you? Do I have to come to Columbia University and hunt you down? Do I have to wait in line to get your autograph?"

"I need to be able to do my job. I need to teach my classes and go on my book tour and do all the things I'm supposed to do without worrying that you are going to hunt me down. You can't do that. I have to be able to lead my life."

The day my second novel is published, I accidentally poke the *Times* into my eye and shred my cornea. The pain is searing. I fumble for the eye doctor's number and go rushing off to his office, returning hours later with what looks like a maxi-pad taped over my face. There is a message from my publisher letting me know that my book has just been reviewed in the Washington *Post*, a message from my mother saying that she's arranged for brownies and crudités to be served at my reading tomorrow in Washington, and a message from "the father."

"It's Stan," he says, his voice tentative, weak. "I got your letter. Why don't you give me a call when you have a moment?"

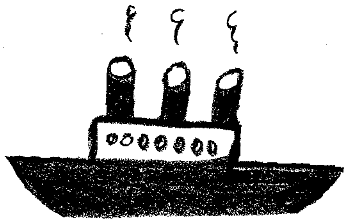
It's been more than a month since I wrote to him. If the review hadn't appeared in the *Post*, would he have called? If I'd been flipping burgers in a McDonald's instead of writing books, would I ever have heard from him?

"Well, what do you know," he says. He's a swaggering big shot, but there's something to him, some half-a-heart, that I instantly appreciate.

"Have you spoken to the Dragon Lady lately?" he asks, and I assume that he is talking about Helene.

"No," I say. "She's a little crazy."

He laughs. "That's the way she always was. That's why I had to do what I did."



Stan, a former football hero and combat veteran, for some reason feels compelled to give me a pep talk. Fifty years after the fact, he quotes what his coach once told him about staying in the game, about not being a quitter. No one has ever spoken to me this way before; it's comforting, inspiring. He couldn't be more different from the father I grew up with, an intellectual, an artist. If I told Stan that I spent every Saturday of my childhood going to museums, he wouldn't know how to respond.

"I'll be in Washington tomorrow for a couple of days on a book tour," I say.

"Why don't you meet me at my lawyer's office and we can talk?"

I think of Helene: "I am not a slice of pie."

The next day, I give a reading in Washington. The bookstore is crowded with neighbors, relatives, my fourth-grade teacher, friends from junior high. I haven't had a chance to tell anyone about the eye injury in advance. When I get up to read, they're shocked.

"It's fine," I say. "It'll be O.K. in a couple of weeks." I crack open the book. My field of vision is a circle about two inches wide. I hold the pages directly in front of my face. My good eye is half closed in sympathy with the injured one. I perform as much from memory as possible.

When the reading is over, a line forms: people wanting books signed, aspiring writers with questions. In the back, I see a stranger, a woman, standing nervously, twisting an umbrella around and around in her hands. Instinctively, I know it is Helene. I continue signing books. The line begins to thin. Just as the last person is leaving, she steps up.

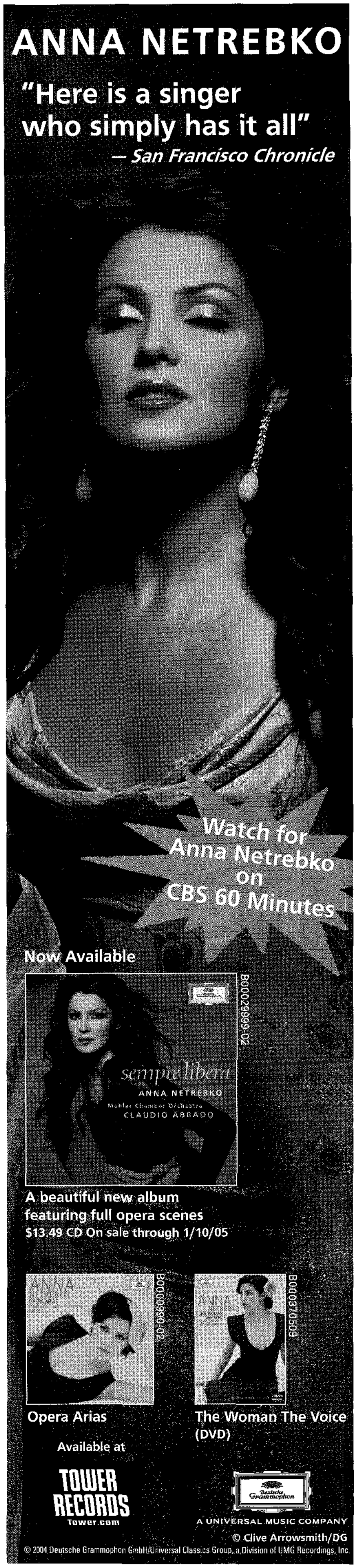
"What did you do to your eye?" she blurts in that rough voice.

"You're not behaving," I say. The store is packed with people who don't know what ghost has risen up.

"You're built just like your father," she says.

Later, when I try to remember what she looked like, I have only a vague memory of green with white polka dots, brown hair piled high on her head. I remember seeing her arm and thinking how small her bones were.

In the distance, another shadow



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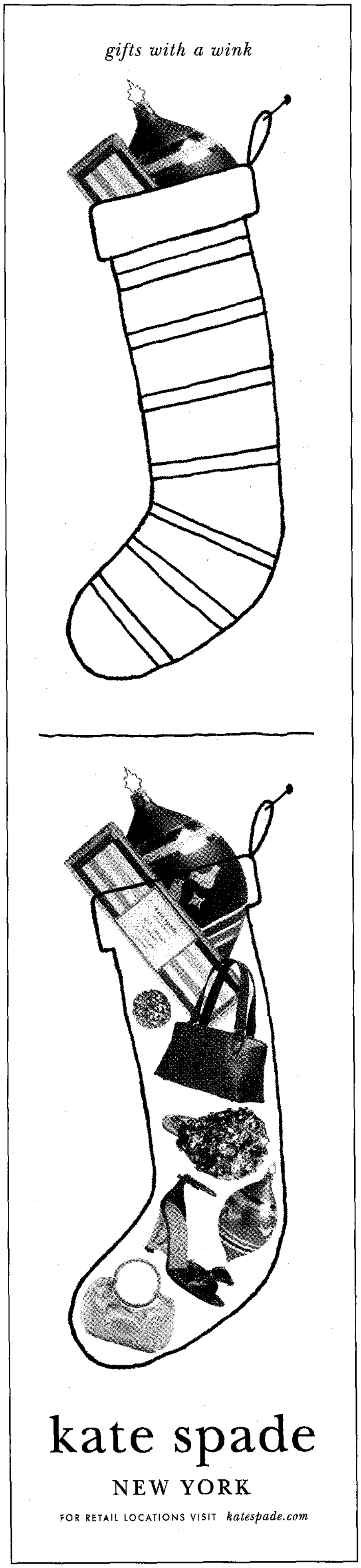

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emerges. My mother and a friend of hers are coming toward me. I imagine the two mothers meeting, colliding. This is something that can't happen. It is entirely against the rules. No one person can have two mothers in the same room at the same time.

"There are people here whose privacy I have to protect," I say to Helene. She turns and hurries out of the store.

In the morning, I take a taxi downtown. I am going to meet the father.

At the lawyer's office, I present myself to the receptionist. A man comes through the interior door. I have no idea who he is—is this the lawyer, my father, or just someone who works here? Anyone could be him, he could be anyone—this is what it's like when you don't know who you are.

"Are you Stan?"

"Yes," he says, surprised that I don't already know. He shakes my hand nervously and leads me into a large conference room. We sit on opposite sides of a wide table.

"My God," he says, looking at me. "My God."

"I cut my cornea," I say, pointing to the patch on my eye.

"Reading a review of your book?"

"No, the obituaries," I say.

"Fine thing. Would you like a Pepsi?" On the table in front of him is a Pepsi bottle, sweating.

I shake my head.

The father is a big, pink-faced man, in a fancy suit, with a collar pin and a tie. His hair is white, thin, slicked back.

We stare at each other. "Fine thing," he keeps saying. He is smiling. He has dimples.

Having grown up without the refracted reflections of biology, I have no idea whether he looks like me or not. I've brought my camera, a Polaroid.

"Do you mind if I take a picture of you?" I ask.

I take two, and he just sits there, flushed, embarrassed.

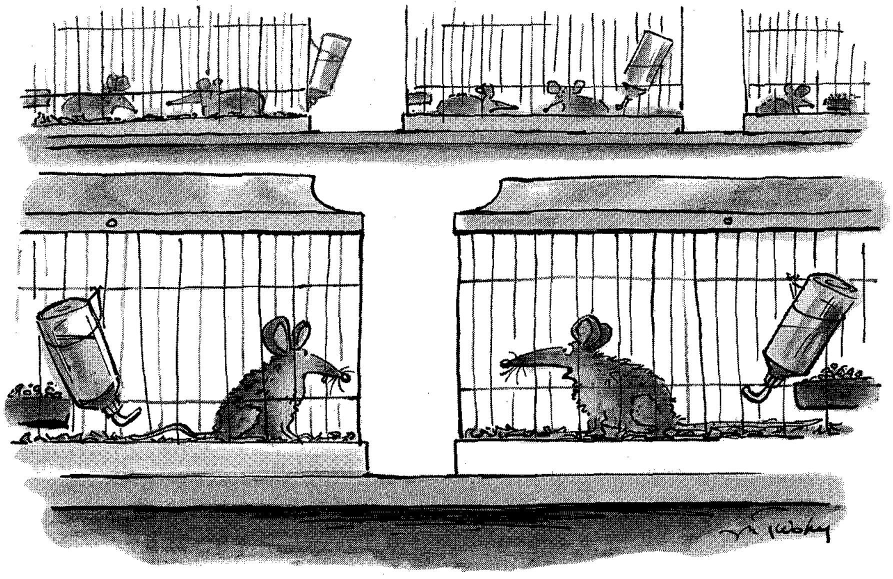
"Could I have one of you?" he asks, and I allow him to take a picture.

It's as though we're making a perverse Polaroid commercial right there in the lawyer's office—a reunion played out as a photo session. We come around the table and stand side by side, watching our images appear. It's easier to really look at someone in a photograph than in real life—no discomfort at meeting the other person's eye, no fear of being caught staring. Later, when I show friends the pictures, it is obvious to everyone that he's my father—"Just look at the face, look at the hands, the ears, they're the same as yours."

Are they?

Stan hands me a copy of my book to sign. I autograph it for him and suddenly wonder what kind of meeting we are having. I feel like a foreign diplomat exchanging official gifts.

"Tell me a little bit about you," I say.



"What if these guys in white coats who bring us food are, like, studying us and we're part of some kind of big experiment?"

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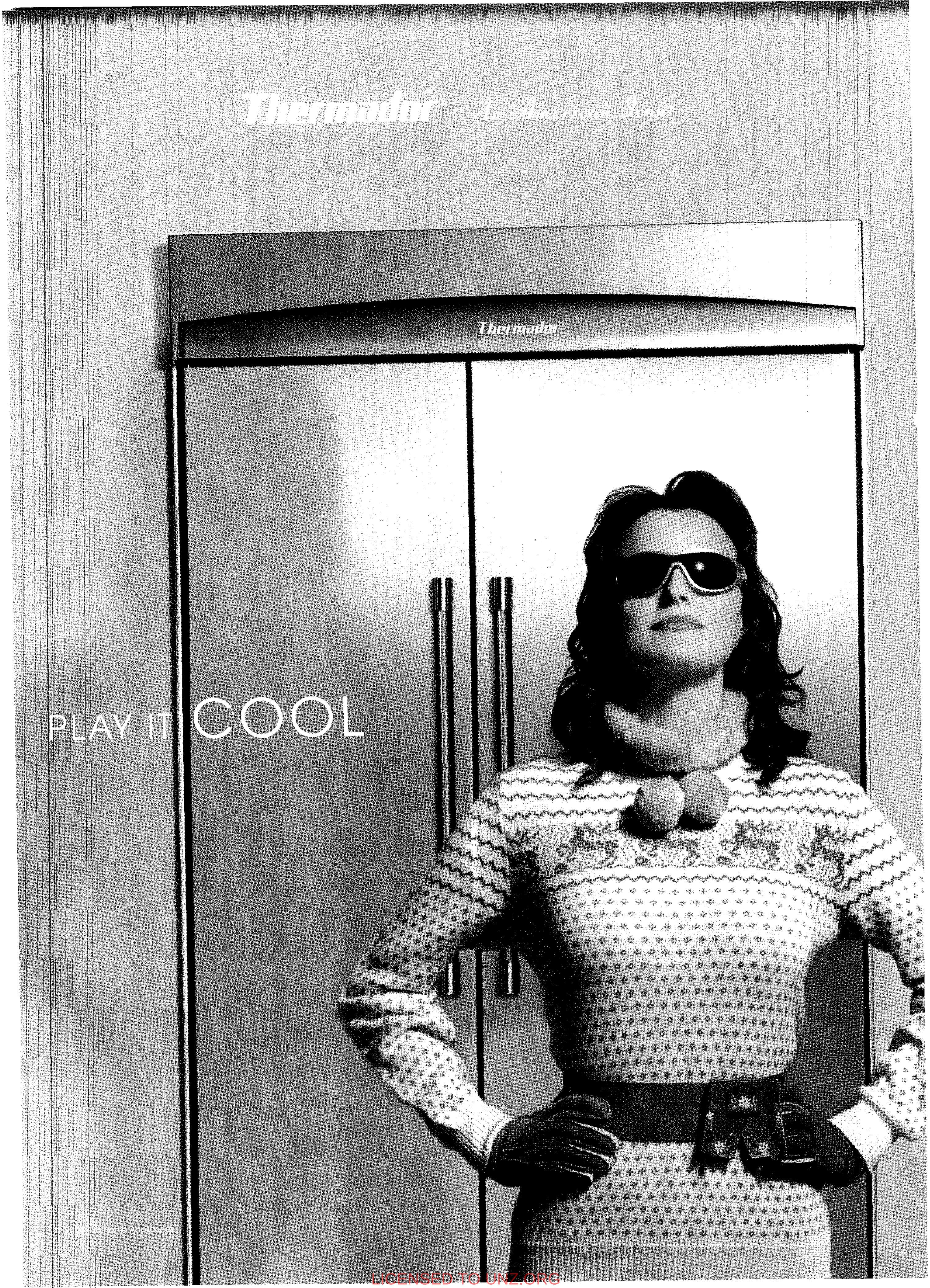
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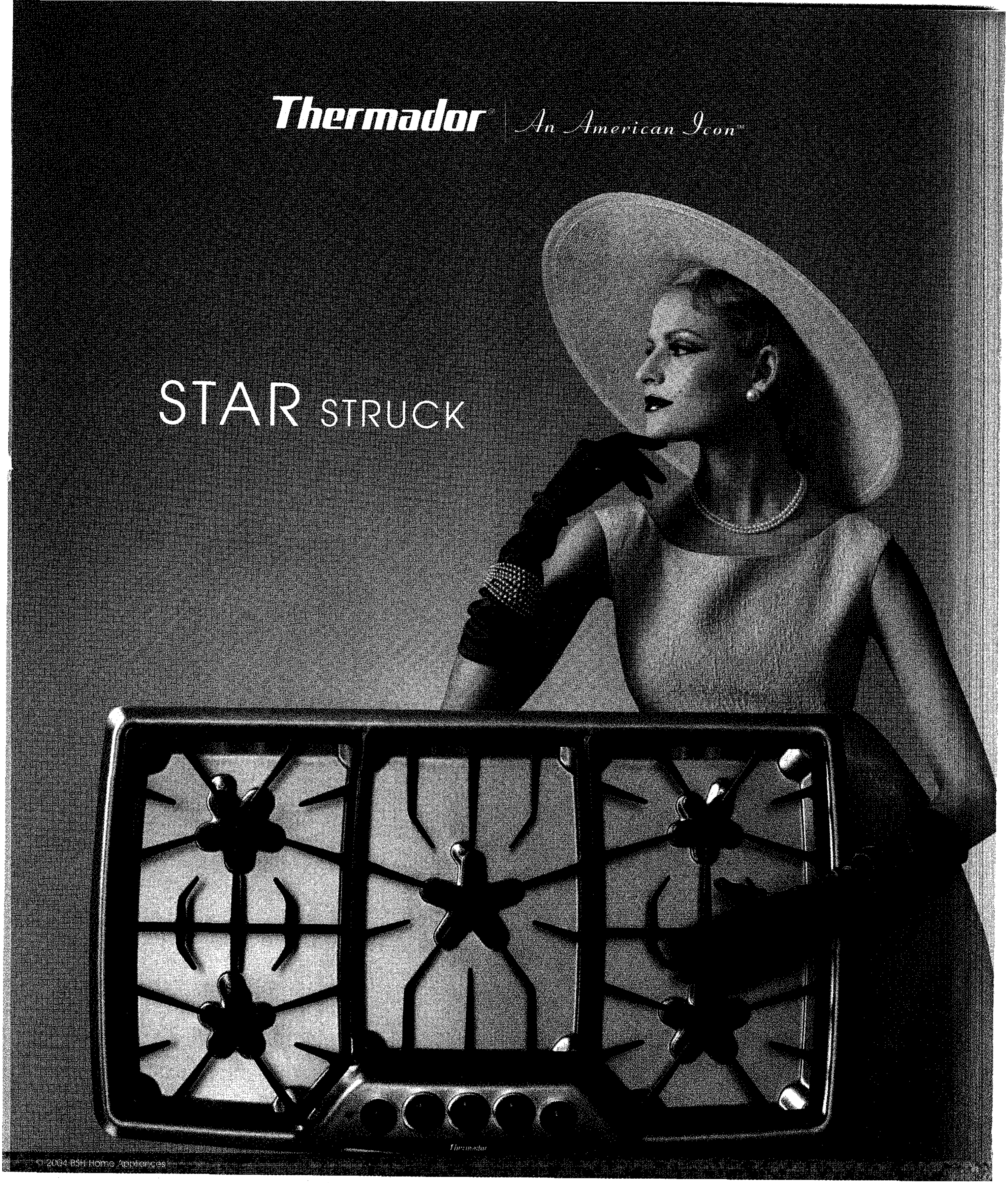

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"I'm not circumcised."

O.K., maybe it wasn't the first thing he said, but it was certainly the second. Maybe he said, "My grandmother was a strict Catholic; she had me baptized. I'm not circumcised."

It is strange information to have about your father. We've just met and he's telling me about his dick. What he's really telling me, I guess, is that he's distanced himself from his Jewish half and that he's obsessed with his penis. He goes on to tell tales of his great-grandmother, a nineteenth-century East Prussian princess, and relatives who were plantation owners on the Eastern Shore of Maryland—slaveholders. He tells me that I'm eligible for the D.A.R. He says that a family member, a British admiral, came over on either the Arc or the Dove, and that there's also a connection to Helmuth von Moltke, who, according to Stan, said, "We will leave them with only their eyes to cry with," when leading Prussian soldiers into France in 1870. Then he goes on about our connections to the Nazis, and the "Death's Head troops," as though they were something to be proud of.

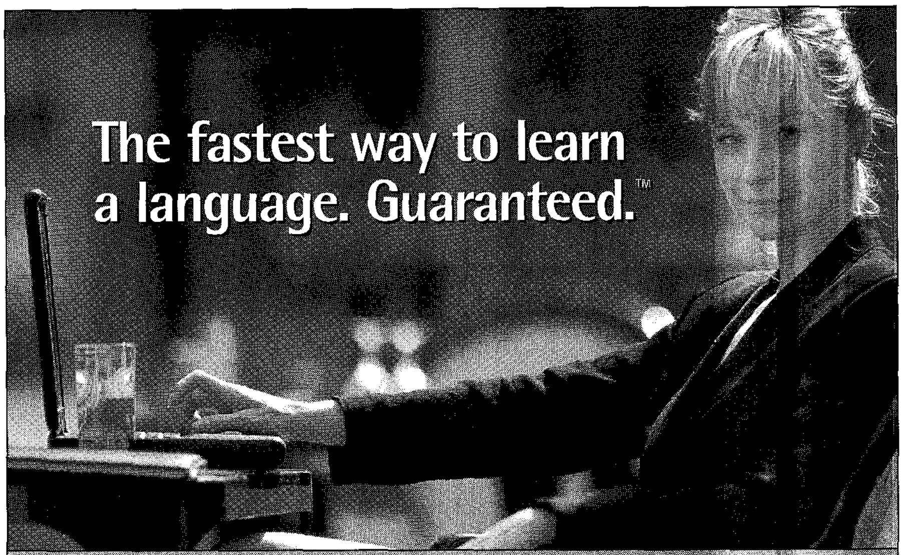
"And the Dragon Lady isn't Jewish, either. She likes to think she is, but she went to Catholic school." They are both half Catholic, half Jewish. He identifies as one and she as the other.

He tells me how beautiful Helene was when she came to work in his store. When I mention the age difference between them—when she was in her mid-teens, he was thirty-two—he gets defensive, saying, "She was a slut who knew more than her years, things a young girl shouldn't know." He blames her for his lack of self-control. I ask if it ever occurred to him that something might have been going on in her mother's house, something with the stepfather. He shrugs it off, and then, when pressed, says yes, she tried to tell him something, but he didn't really know what she was talking about, and yes, he probably should have tried to find out.

I ask him about their relationship: How often did he see her? Did he ever really think he might leave his wife?

He is sweating, stuffed into his good suit.

His wife knew about the affair. Helene has told me that. Helene has also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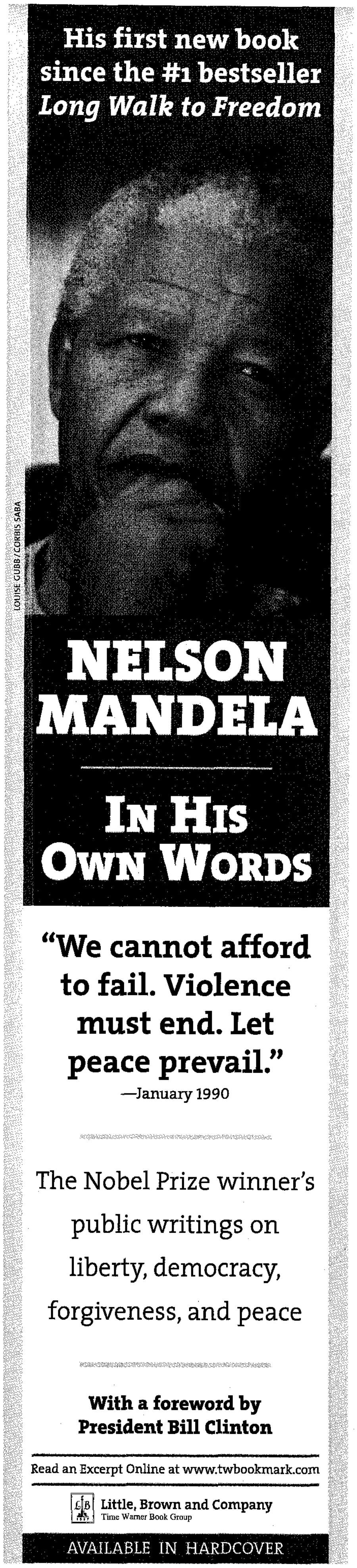
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told me that Stan sometimes brought along his oldest son when they went out. She met the younger ones, too, but she never knew them very well.

Did Stan think he was such a big guy that he could have it all? I picture the affluence of the early sixties, highball glasses and aqua-blue party dresses, Cadillac convertibles, big hair: Helene doing a kind of demented Audrey Hepburn thing; Stan, the football hero, the veteran, with a wife at home, a young girl on the side, thinking he's got the good life.

"What did you do for fun?" I ask and he just looks at me. The answer is evident. Sex. The affair was about sex, at least for him. I am the product of a sex life, not a relationship.

"She had a problem," he says. "She was a nymphomaniac. She went out with other men, lots of men."

Here I believe Helene. How much of a nymphomaniac could a schoolgirl be? She was clever, crafty, probably trained by an expert—her mother. (I have a mental picture of Shelley Winters playing Charlotte Haze in the original film version of "Lolita.") But what Helene looked for in Stan was comfort.

It is clear that Stan is still taken with her, obsessed. He asks me about her in great detail. I feel like the child of divorced parents—except that I have no idea who these people are or what they are talking about. What they are most interested in is talking about each other.

Stan tells me that he and his wife wanted to adopt me, and that Helene wouldn't allow it. "I wanted to take care of you," he says. "After it happened, after she'd given birth, I heard that you were a boy." He looks at me as if there were something to be said.

"I'm not," I say.

"I guess it's good we didn't adopt you. My wife might have taken it out on you. She might have treated you badly."

"Yes, it's good."

"She told me she was pregnant the day my mother died."

Later, I ask Helene about these things and she is furious. "He was never going to adopt you. He never even suggested it. I made the arrangements myself and never told him what I was going to do."

"Did you tell him you were pregnant the day his mother died?"

"Yes," she says, and there is the defiant suck of a cigarette.

I change the subject. "Helene told me about her father," I say to Stan. "She was very close to him and he died of a heart attack."

"He didn't die of a heart attack," Stan says indignantly. "He was the White House bookie and he died in a shoot-out with another bookie." It makes sense. It explains a part of the story that Helene couldn't really explain, something about men carrying her father into the house, him dying upstairs, and the whole family having to stay at a fancy hotel for a while. I remember an early school field trip to Ford's Theatre—the image of Abe Lincoln being shot and then carried across the street to Petersen's Boarding House to die.

I am relieved that Helene's father didn't have a heart attack. There are criminals in my past, but at least their hearts are strong.

"Tell me about your people," Stan says. He asks about "my people" as though I'd been raised by wolves.

My people are Jews, Marxists, socialists, homosexuals. "My people," I tell him, "are lovely. You couldn't ask for better."

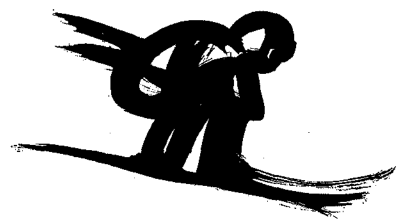
I owe him nothing. There is nothing about me, about my life, that he would understand.

We are winding down. I am exhausted.

"I'd like to take you into my family, to introduce you to your brothers and sister," he says. "But before I can do that my wife wants everything to be clear. She wants a test to prove that you are my child."

I get the feeling that Stan has got into trouble before; that Helene may have been the first, but she certainly wasn't the last; that infidelity is something his wife has put up with for a long time.

"Would you consider a blood test? You wouldn't have to pay for it." It's the "You wouldn't have to pay for it" that throws me. Is this what I get as my big reward, the reparation for all the wrongs



HELLS ANGELS, ZAMBONI DIVISION

• •

of the past—a DNA test? And what's behind Door No. 3? Insulting as this is, on some level I can't blame him. Throwing it all to science may be a good idea—it may make fact out of what feels like fiction.

"I'll think about it," I say.

Fine thing.

In the middle of July, 1993, Stan and I make a plan to meet at a lab in D.C.

It is less a lab than a collection center, the most generic, standard-issue office ever made. The fluorescent lighting is like an X-ray, revealing everything.

Stan is there waiting—the only white man in the room. We sit down next to each other and wait.

They call Stan's name. He tries to give them a personal check, but they won't take it. There are signs everywhere detailing how payment is to be made: all checks must be certified. He offers to get them the cash, but they can't accept cash, only certified checks. He goes to the bank downstairs and for some reason is unable to get one. He returns, flustered, humiliated. He's on the verge of a tantrum, but it's all to no avail. The check and the blood must be sent together. Because this kind of test is often part of a lawsuit, the lab insists on being paid in advance, in order to avoid the complication of collection. This is the stuff of murders, rapes—proof. Are you or are you not my father?

The next morning, we try again.

"Long time no see," I say.

"What if we get in there and the nurse is the Dragon Lady? She'll come at us with a square, blunt-tipped needle," Stan jokes nervously. I laugh, but it isn't funny. We have a tacit agreement not to tell Helene what we are doing. What we are doing is insulting to her.

As Stan walks up to the counter, I notice that his butt looks familiar; I am watching him and I'm thinking, There goes my ass. That's my ass walking away. His blue sports coat covers it halfway, but I can see it broken into sections, departments of ass, high and low, just like mine. I notice his thighs—chubby, thick, not a pretty thing. This is the first time I have seen anyone else in my body. I am fascinated. I stare as he turns and comes back to me. I look down at his shoes, white loafers, country-club shoes, stretched out, fading. Inside the shoes, his feet are wide and short. I look up; his hands are the same as mine, square like paws. He is an exact replica, the male version of me.

"Fine thing," Stan says, seeing me stare.

I go first. I roll up my sleeve. The technician pulls on his gloves, assembles his tubes, and ties the rubber tourniquet around my arm. Stan is watching. The needle goes in, a sharp metal prick.

I look back at Stan. It feels strange. I am giving blood for this man; I am letting my flesh be punctured to prove that I am of him. It is beyond sexual.

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stand the need for proof, for some true measure of our relationship, and also because I have a fantasy that there is something in it for me: that Stan will keep his word, that he will take me into his family, that I will suddenly have siblings.

"Please sign here," the technician says as he hands me the tubes of my blood, one at a time.

"What?"

"You have to sign the tubes."

They are warm in my palm, filled with the chemical sum of who and what I am. I sign quickly, hoping not to faint. I am holding myself in my hands.

Stan is next. He takes off his jacket, revealing short shirtsleeves, sad-old-guy style. His arms are plump, pale, almost fluffy. I am suddenly sickened by it all. I wait in the hall. I do not watch him holding his blood, signing his tubes. He comes out of the room, puts his jacket back on, and we are out the door.

"I would have liked to take you for a nice lunch if you'd worn something better," he says when we are in the hallway.

I am dressed perfectly well—in linen pants and a blouse. DNA testing is not a black-tie occasion. I am tempted to say, That's O.K.—I would have liked you to be my father if you weren't such a jerk. But I am so stunned that I become stupidly apologetic. I am not wearing what he wanted. I am not wearing a dress. I am not living up to his idea of a daughter.

We go to a less than mediocre restaurant down the block. People seem to know him there. He introduces me to the maître d' as though that meant something. We sit down. The tablecloths are green, the napkins polyester.

"You don't wear jewelry," Stan says.

I am single. I live in New York City. I am not wearing a dress. I know exactly what he is thinking.

I say nothing. Later, I'll wish that I'd said something. I'll wish I'd told him the truth: I have no jewelry, but if you want to throw me some diamonds I'd be glad to wear them. I come from a family that doesn't do that sort of thing. I grew up boycotting grapes and iceberg lettuce because they weren't picked by union workers.

What kind of father makes his child travel to another city to prove that she is his child and then criticizes her for not wearing the right clothes to the lab, for not wearing jewelry she doesn't own to the lunch she didn't know she was having?

"How will you feel if the test comes back and I'm not your father?"

You're my father, I think. I wasn't positive before, but now, seeing you, seeing your ass, my ass—I'm sure.

The heat outside is stupefying. I walk as though I had been hit with something, blasted. I have become a stranger to myself. To be adopted is to be adapted, to be taken apart and sewn back together again. Whether or not you regain full function, there will always be scar tissue; there will always be hot spots, flareups that take you by surprise.

Over the next few months, we meet several times. We meet in hotels. We meet at Holiday Inns, Marriotts, Comfort Inns, Renaissance Hotels; in the odd spaces that are between spaces, the there that is never there.

We greet each other in the lobby, awkwardly kiss hello, and then move to the glass atrium, or the inner courtyard, or the café, looking up at a surround of numbered doors, housekeeping carts making their rounds. We come from the outside and are plunged into a temperature-controlled environment where the potted plants are watered automatically and rotated seasonally like crops, where everything is suspended in time—hermetically sealed.

Ever since Stan's comment about my clothing, I worry about what I am wearing, how I look. I continually feel that I am being evaluated. I want his approval.

There is something sleazy about it, meeting in the middle of the afternoon in these middle-of-the-road hotels. Does he think that these are safe places, where no one will see us? Does he have something in mind? It is never clear to me why we are meeting.

"You don't know what it does to me to look at you," he says.

He doesn't mean "The resemblance is amazing," or "I'm so proud of what you've done with your life." He says it in a lascivious way. He is looking at me and seeing someone else.

He never does anything to push it further, but I am always thinking that he will. I imagine him saying, "I've got a room, I want to see you naked." I imagine undressing, as part of the proce-

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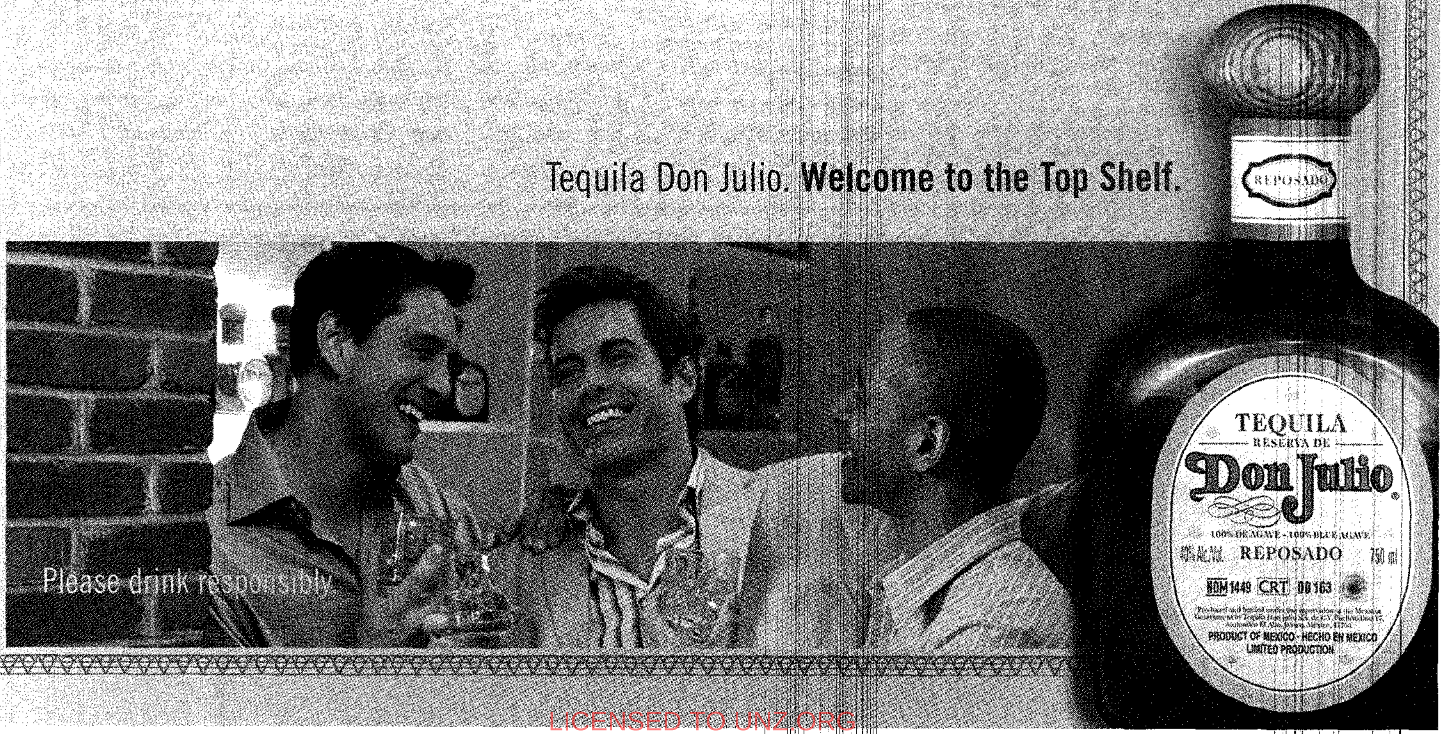
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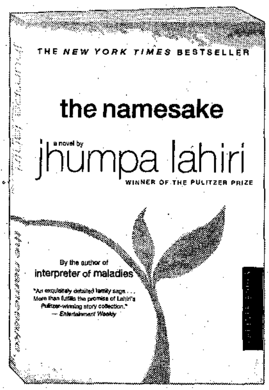

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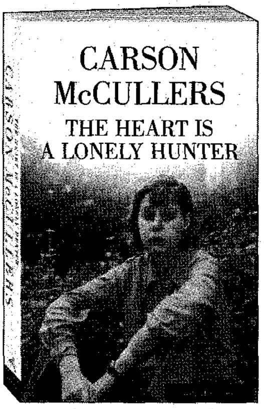

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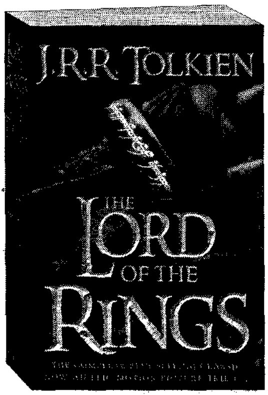

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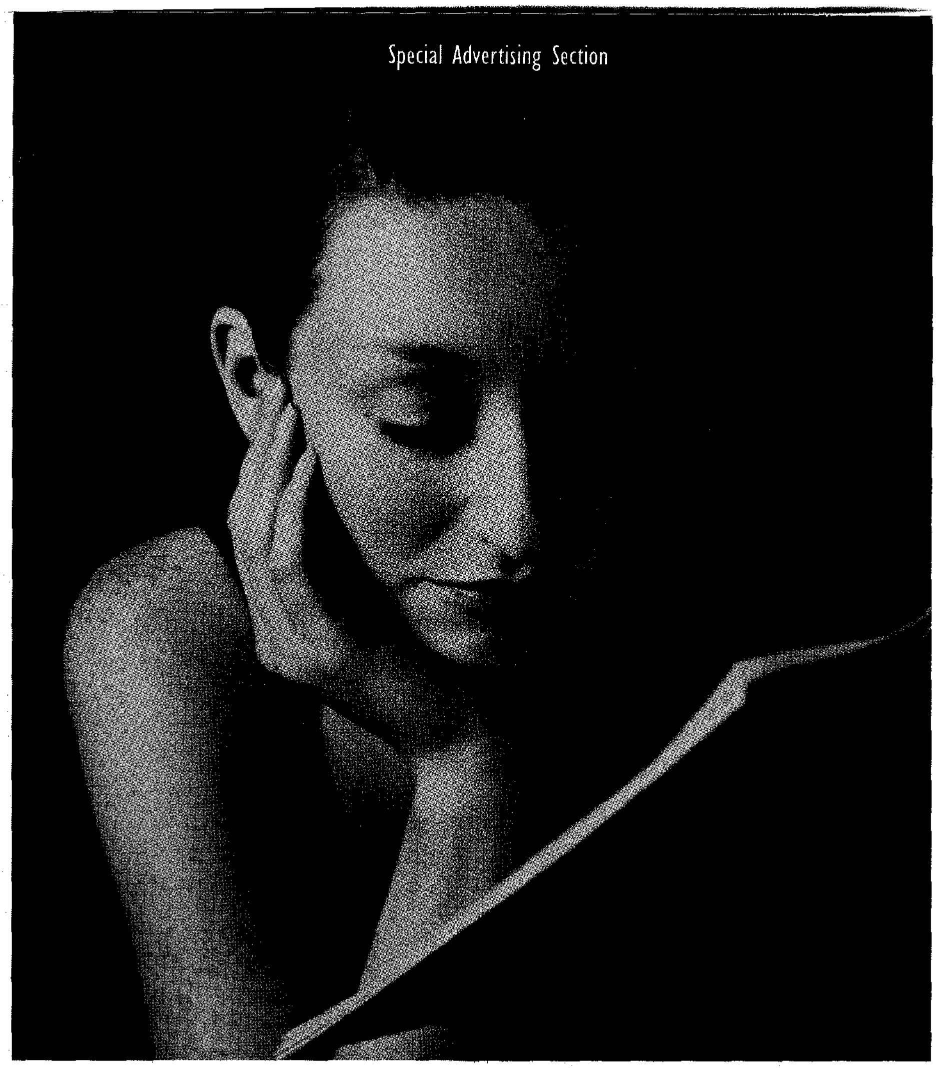

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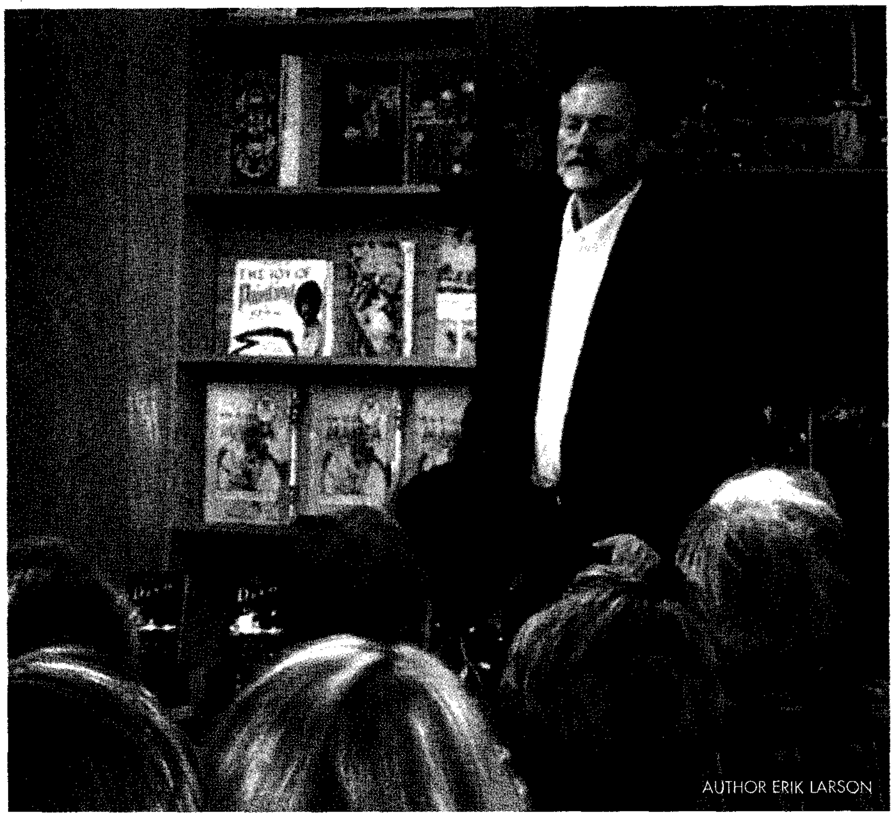
BY MEAKIN ARMSTRONG

PREFACE THE BOOK CLUB BOOM

They gather in living rooms and kitchens, in studio apartments, bookstores, cafés, and library conference rooms. Usually in small groups numbering from five to twelve, they talk about characterization, plot, and how their own lives interact with what they're reading, often over chips and wine. The more organized of these reading groups are courted by book club coordinators and use special reading guides. Occasionally, authors even make personal appearances (or join the meetings via speakerphone). Pundits and prognosticators, members of the media, along with bookstores and publishers agree: we are in a book club boom.

Those not a part of the ballyhoo might assume these groups are a throwback to "Main Street" community organizations that once held small town life in their stolid grip. Perhaps they think these clubs exist only in purported cultural deserts, where an interaction with those who read something other than TV listings is rare. Nothing, however, could be farther from the truth. Reading groups are meeting throughout the country, in cities as large as New York, in suburbs and subdivisions everywhere, and in countless small towns across the nation.

"Sometimes, it seems like everyone on my morning train is in a reading group," says Thomas Allen, a writer and book club member in Bethesda, Maryland. Book clubs are a force in the publishing industry—published accounts have said that as many as a million book groups are meeting in the U.S., although that number can't be easily verified.



AUTHOR ERIK LARSON

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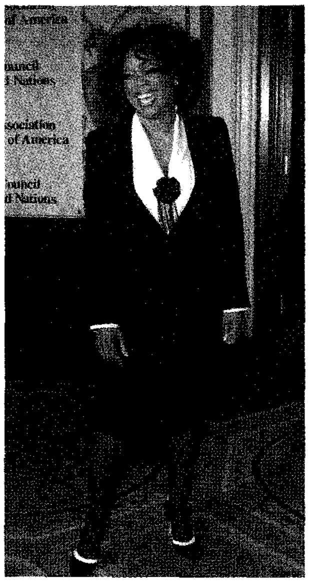
Chapter One
THE OPRAH EFFECT

Many attribute the book club phenomenon to Oprah Winfrey. When the immensely popular talk show host recommended contemporary fiction and nonfiction for her audience, all forty-six of those books became best-sellers. And now that Winfrey is recommending classics for her recently revived book club, by authors such as Leo Tolstoy ("Anna Karenina"), we've had the odd sight of John Steinbeck's 1952 "East of Eden" on the 2004 New York *Times* best-seller list.

> " Winfrey performed a great service. She got lots of people to actually finish a good book. "



But the everyday book club isn't a cog in some vast media machine. A long-established book group in the greater Washington, D.C., area, in fact, was hesitant to select a book approved by the TV personality, and ordered "Cold Mountain" for one of their meetings—just without the celebrity's ubiquitous book club sticker. Nonetheless, professional book club moderator Rachel W. Jacobsohn, of the Association of Book Group Readers and Leaders, says Winfrey "performed a great service. She got lots of people to actually finish a good book."

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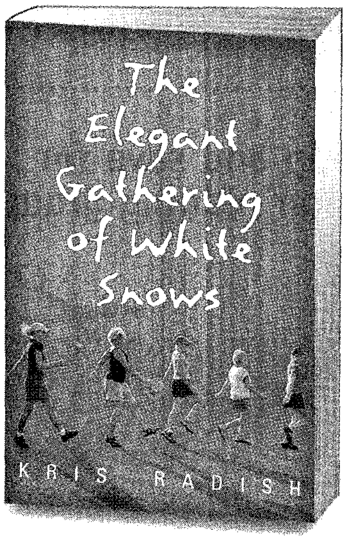

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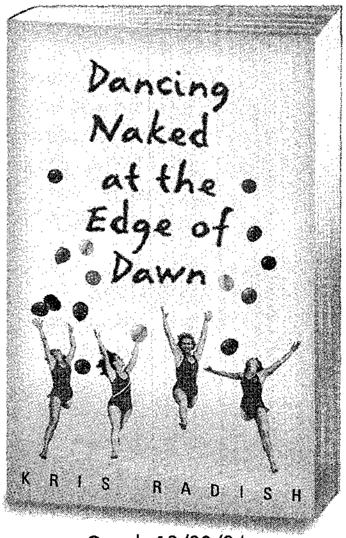

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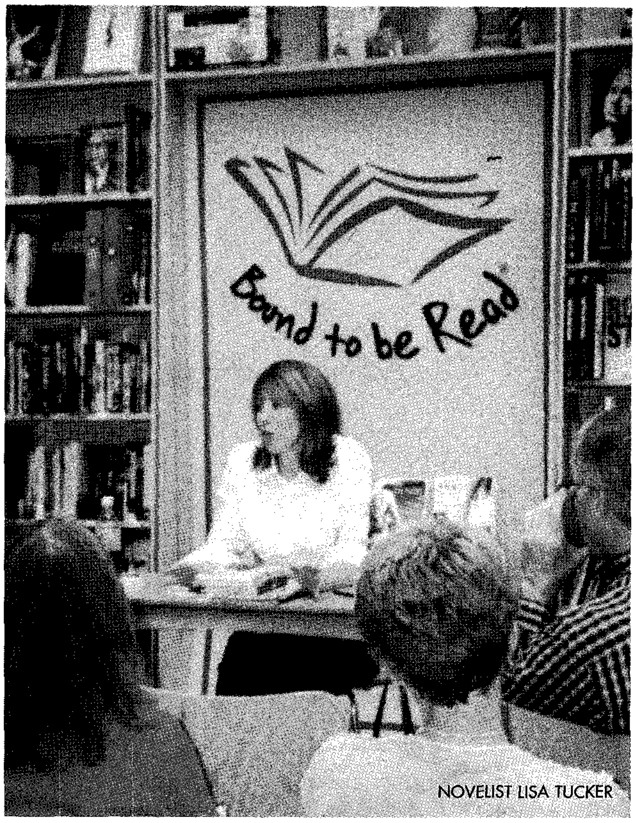


NOVELIST LISA TUCKER

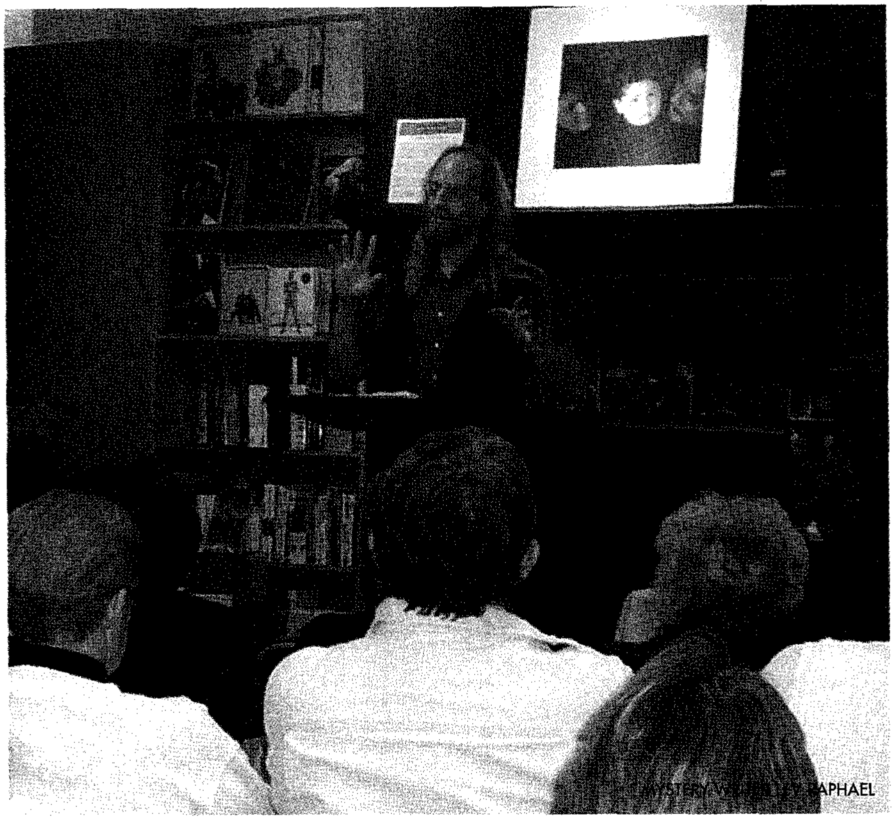
How else does one explain the seeming proliferation of reading groups? Prognosticators of the social order use a variety of terms to describe the phenomenon. According to Yankelovich, a marketing consultancy firm specializing in trends, it's an example of "hiving," in which consumers reach out to others seeking comfort and connection. Similarly, futurist Faith Popcorn agrees that "cocooning" and "clanning" trends are reflected in the book club paradigm. At any rate, post-9/11 Americans seem to be moving toward small, like-minded affinity groups, often from their own home-based command post. The book club is, in effect, yet another affinity group. But this explanation still falls short, given that it doesn't account for the huge number of book clubs in operation well before 2001.

> " Post-9/11 Americans seem to be moving toward small, like-minded affinity groups. "

Ellie Hellis, coordinator for book clubs at the Tattered Cover Book Store in Denver, Colorado, works with some two hundred reading groups on a regular basis, giving advice on which books to select and how to conduct meetings. Hellis says book clubs have always been around, although neither heralded by the media, nor properly serviced by stores and publishers. She also notes that she has been in a club since the sixties, and that Tattered Cover has been interacting with reading groups since 1986.

While others delve into a theoretical view of the book club universe, it's worth remembering that these so-called hives and cocoons are instrumental in selling books, albeit on a local level. Virginia Valentine, a Tattered Cover alumna, compared a recent best-seller fiction paperback list of the Denver *Post* with one from the New York *Times*. Valentine surmises that the *Post* list, with début novel "The Kite Runner" by Khaled Hosseini in the number-one spot, is "book club driven," supporting her notion that book clubs generally favor literary fiction. The top seller on the *Times* list, however, was "Blue Dahlia" by Nora Roberts, a ghost-story thriller. "I would venture that it's pretty hard to get on a national list unless you are writing a mystery or a romance novel—usually not book club picks," she says. "I would suppose that the Denver *Post* reflects in any given week what the local clubs have selected for the next month."

TUCKER SPEAKS TO SPLENDID LADIES CLUB IN ALBUQUERQUE COURTESY OF BOUND TO BE READ; *FACING PAGE:* RAPHAEL IMAGE COURTESY OF SCHULER BOOKS & MUSIC IN OKEMOS, MI



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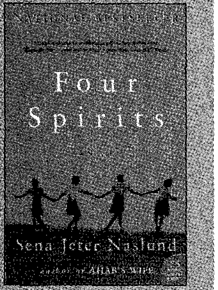

Chapter Two

MEETING EXPECTATIONS

Most book clubs are primarily social. Kat MacGilvray, a facilitator for clubs at Albuquerque's Bound to be Read bookstore, says her clubs "are a great way to meet people. We often get someone who's just moved to town asking us about joining a club." Bound to be Read has some sixteen in-store clubs. About half of these are open to the public, while the other half are by invitation only and are often organized by a group of friends. The range of interests at these in-store clubs is immense: popular fiction; mysteries; pregnancy and birth; literary fiction and so on, with each club holding monthly discussions.

Those who would like to join one of the clubs at Bound to be Read can peruse the bookstore's special shelves, dedicated to those clubs with an open membership. If you liked Margaret Atwood's "Blind Assassin," for example, you can see that the "Splendid Ladies"—one of the store's more popular

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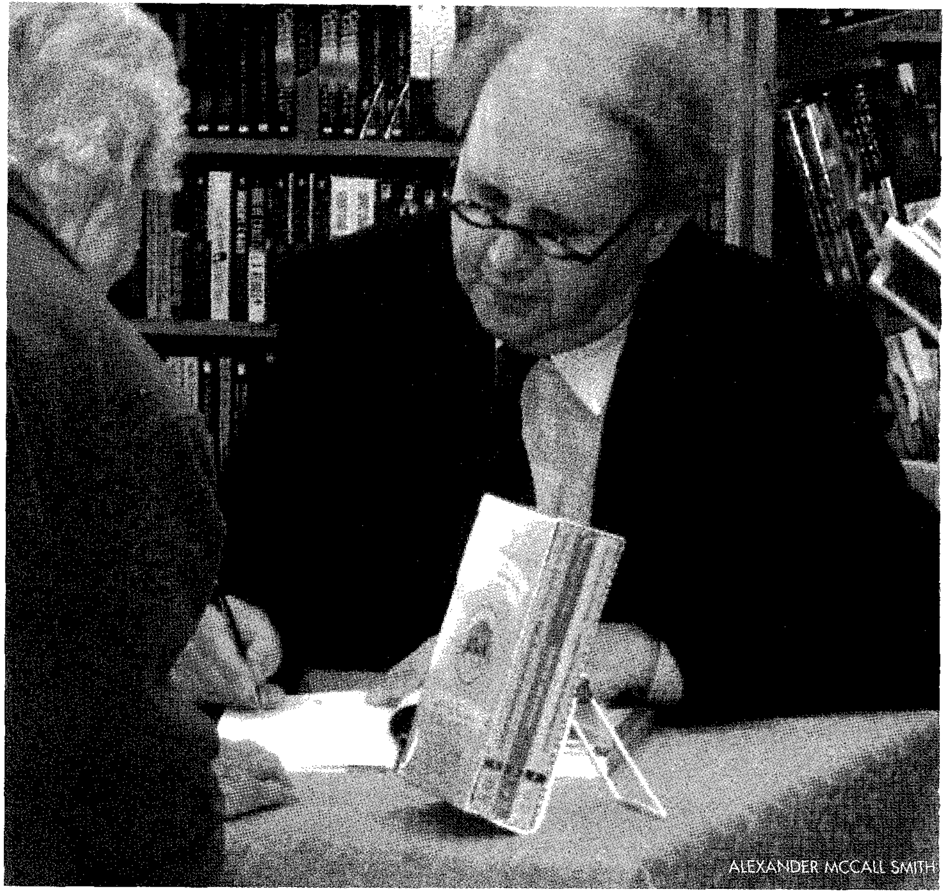


ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH

"One Michigan bookstore has a table loaded down with a hundred-odd registered book club selections. . . and McCall Smith's detective novel is constantly on the table."

"open" clubs—read that book last March, and is currently reading Jhumpa Lahiri's "The Namesake." In January, they will be reading "The Kite Runner." These shelves are a way to get a sense of each reading group's taste in books, or simply to get their recommendations for your own reading.

Of course, private book clubs are harder to find, given that they don't advertise and usually meet in someone's living room. Even bookstores such as the Tattered Cover, well known for its interaction with clubs, don't offer what they call "matchmaking services." One option is to form your own club. "It's like when you can't get on a team, so you form your own one," says writer Allen. Tattered Cover's Hellis recommends "asking around and talking about books whenever you get a chance. You'll find a club pretty quickly that way."

The group Allen attends in Bethesda has been in existence for at least a decade, and is perhaps among the better organized. They rotate moderators and lean toward literary fiction. The person whose turn it is to moderate makes a short presentation with reviews and perhaps a backgrounder of the writer. The moderator then assigns that book (which must be no more than three hundred pages and available in paperback) by fiat. In turn, the club makes a bulk order at the local bookstore, for a twenty per cent club discount. At the end of the meeting where the book is discussed, members vote on whether or not they liked it. Phillip Roth's "I Married a Communist," for example, was recently voted down, by six to three.

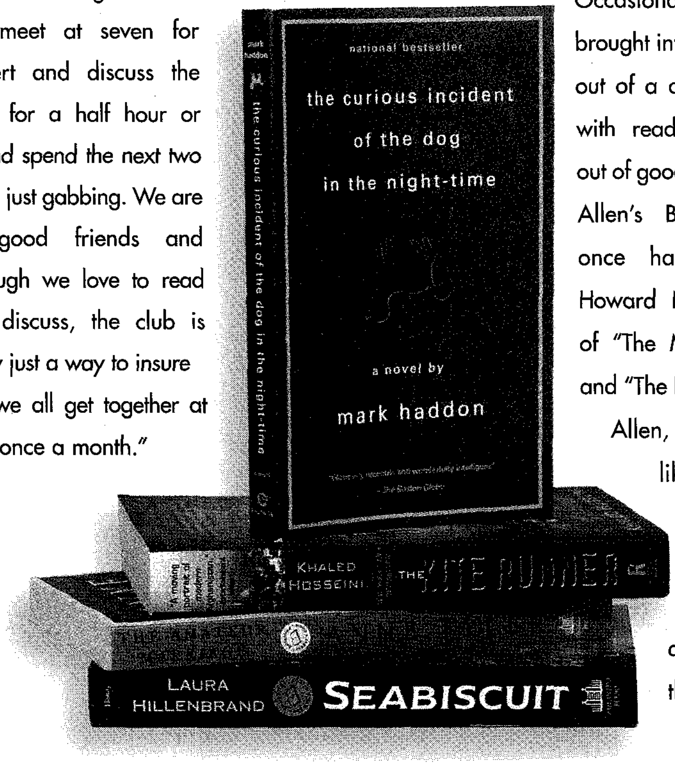
Other groups succeed under a single moderator, a sort of benign dictator, who helps select the books and tries to keep the meetings on

ALEXANDER MCCALL SMITH BOOK SIGNING IMAGE COURTESY OF SCHULER BOOKS & MUSIC

schedule. One group in East Lansing, Michigan, is known for reading only eight books a year (they take the summer months off). At each of their meetings, someone who might add some expertise to the discussion is invited to attend, be it a local university professor or even the author.

Hellis, however, claims that her own book club falls somewhere well below that. "My group is absurd. It's like herding cats." She notes that her reading group has a few members "who will read anything," along with a few "reading hysterics" who "would love to take charge." Generally, though, the persons most persistent in having a book read get their book chosen. She says their discussions are rarely high-flown, and usually have more to do with the story told in the book, and how it relates to the lives of those within her group.

Rebecca Schaefer, who works for a hedge fund in Middleburg, Virginia, says that the six women in her group read mostly literary fiction, usually with a historical bent. "There are lots of ways to conduct the meeting, but I usually print the publisher's book club questions off the Internet to get us started. We meet at seven for dessert and discuss the book for a half hour or so and spend the next two hours just gabbing. We are all good friends and although we love to read and discuss, the club is really just a way to insure that we all get together at least once a month."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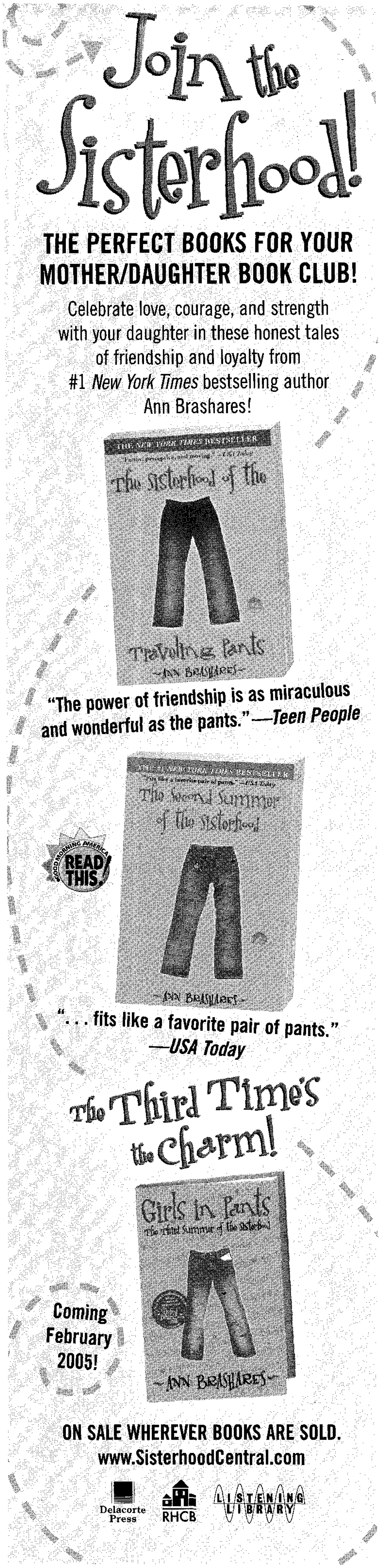
Chapter Three
PAPERBACK WRITER

Ideas for which books to read come from reviews, suggestions from friends, the Book Sense Picks list (distributed in independent bookstores and available on-line) or from a general sense of what everyone seems to be reading now. Anecdotally, many appear to be reading "The Kite Runner." Bookstores say that most clubs seem to lean toward reading contemporary literary fiction, in trade paperback editions. Schuler Books & Music in Okemos, Michigan, has a long table loaded down with the hundred-odd books currently being read by registered book clubs, available at a twenty per cent discount. Says Schuler's Jennifer Bell, "People can see what others are reading, and get ideas. After one group has finished a book, another might begin reading it, too. 'The No. 1 Ladies' Detective Agency' was constantly on the table.

Chapter Four
TALK WITH THE AUTHOR

Occasionally, writers are brought into the mix, partly out of a desire to interact with readers, and partly out of good business sense. Allen's Bethesda group once had a visit by Howard Norman, author of "The Museum Guard" and "The Bird Artist." Says Allen, "Norman was like one of us, sometimes we forgot that he'd actually written the book." The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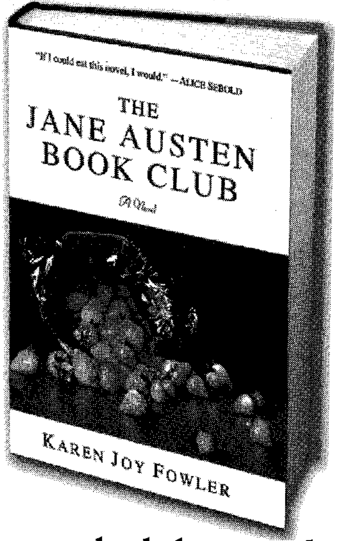
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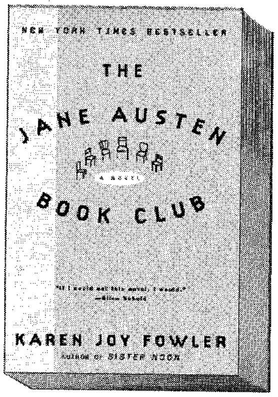
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writer was contacted at a reading, and readily agreed to attend. Like Norman, writers are approached at public readings, or via their individual Web sites. Sometimes, their relatives even get involved. Jonathan Ames, whose novels include "Wake Up, Sir!" and "The Extra Man," says, "I've only attended one book club meeting: my mother's. There were about twenty ladies, primarily retired schoolteachers, and we gathered—as is their wont—in an Italian restaurant. First we had dinner, and then we discussed 'The Extra Man.' Most of the ladies kept referring to the narrator of my novel as 'you,' and I tried to correct them—that the narrator was not me, but they wouldn't have it. Oh, well," asserts Ames, "the truth is, they were right."

HarperCollins has a program called Invite the Author. Book club members who fill out a

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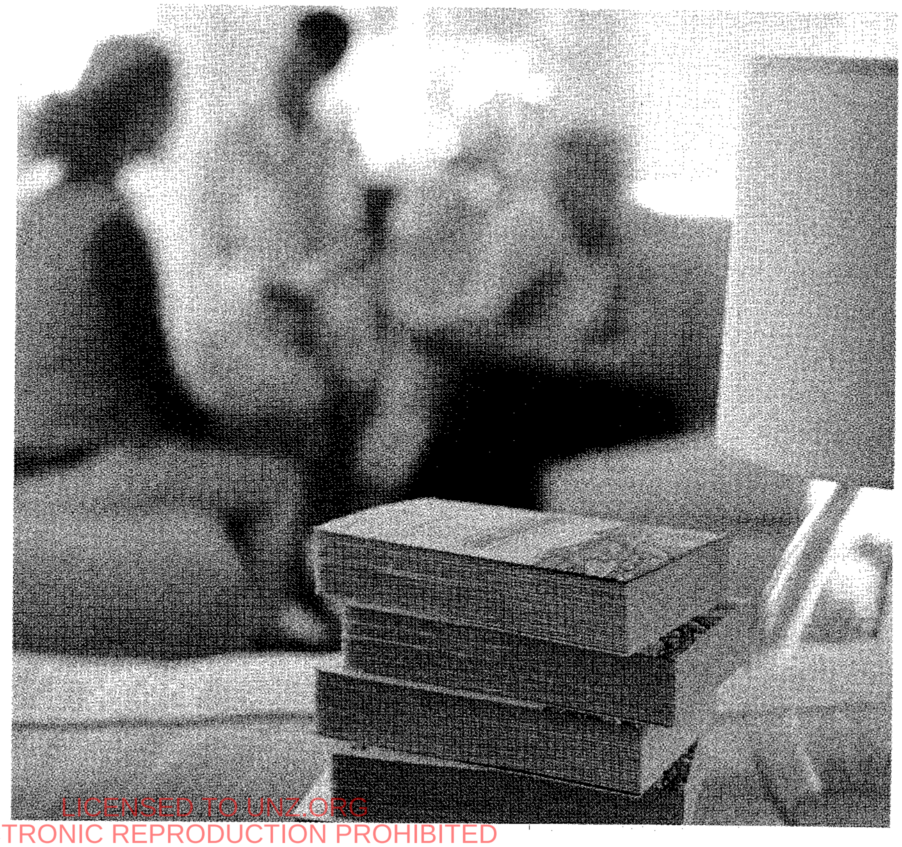

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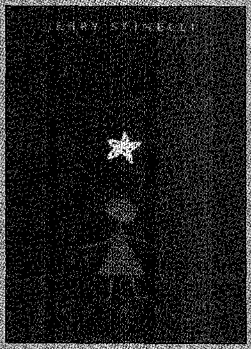
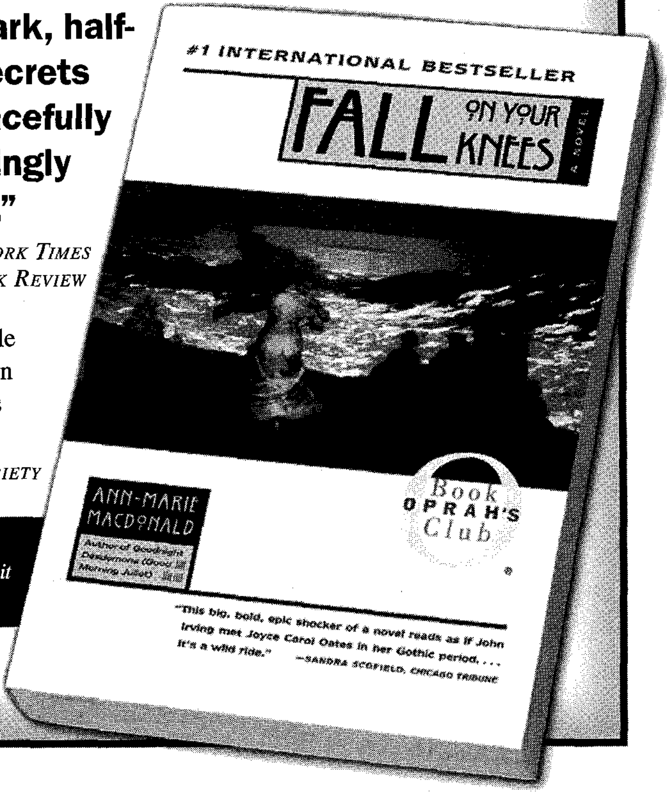
TEEN READS

Reading groups are becoming increasingly popular among teens—whether at the library or in schools. Some groups have librarian facilitators, while a growing number are run by the young adults themselves. Publishers are getting in on the act, too: Dell Laurel Leaf, an imprint of Random House Children's Books, publishes Reader's Circle, a line of books designed with these clubs in mind. Books include American Library Association Newbery Medal winners "The Giver" (1994) by Lois Lowry and "Holes" (1999) by Louis Sachar, as well as young adult standouts "Stargirl" by Jerry Spinelli and "The Chocolate War" by Robert Cormier. Reader's Circle books provide sixteen pages of additional content in the back of each book, which include discussion questions, author interviews and biographies, and other book recommendations.


JERRY SPINELLI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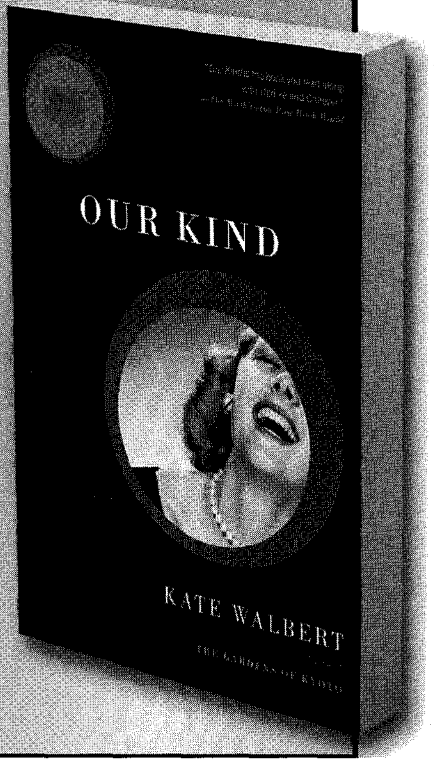
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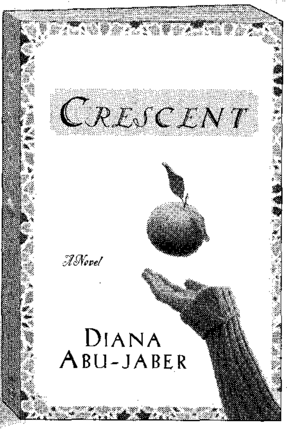

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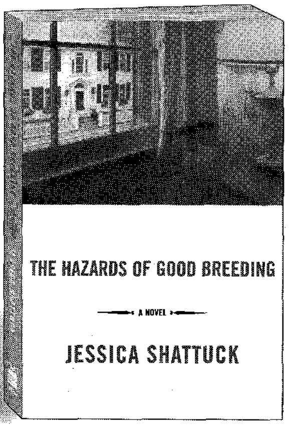

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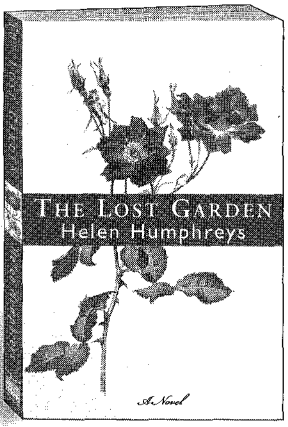

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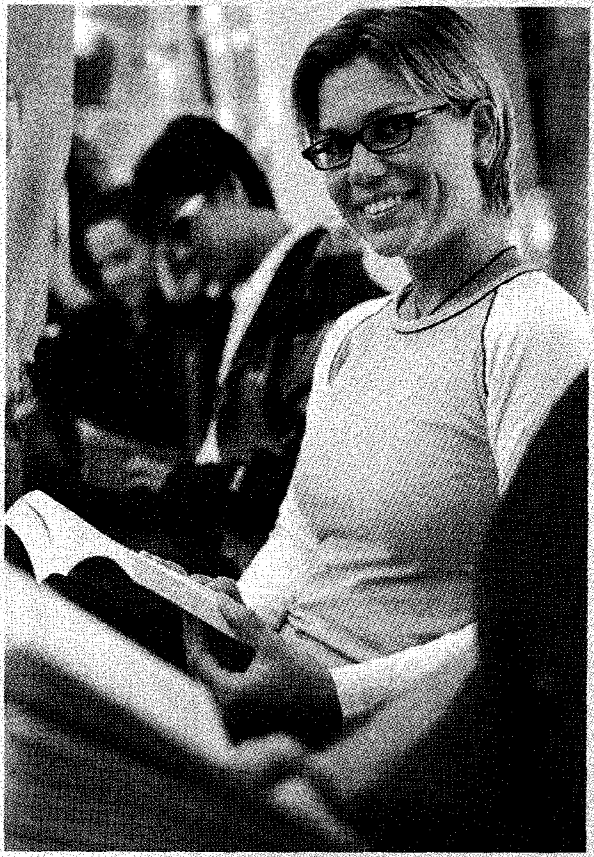
STARTING A READING GROUP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Your local bookstore is a good place to seek advice on how to start a reading group. Some, such as Denver's Tattered Cover Book Store, even offer free orientation sessions to neophyte clubs. Libraries, which are known for open-membership clubs, will occasionally provide book club tip sheets and workshops for their moderators. You can also learn about reading groups from books such as "The Reading Group Handbook," written by professional book club facilitator Rachel Jacobsohn. The Book Group Readers and Leaders association founder and president also manages eighteen reading groups in the Chicago area, and produces a tri-annual newsletter for members. Additionally it maintains a database for members to find book groups throughout the country. Jacobsohn (rachelj26@sbcglobal.net) suggests a few guidelines for running a successful group:

- **Set ground rules.** Decide which types of books your group will generally read; how those books are to be picked; how often you will meet; and whether or not there'll be an ongoing moderator.

- **Find a clean, well-lighted place.** Create an atmosphere conducive to discussion (away from vacuum cleaners and crying children). Noisy restaurants, suggests Jacobsohn, aren't the best places to meet.

- **Have some questions.** Bring a few questions to the group that can't be answered by an easy "yes" or "no." Mark up passages for the group that might stimulate conversation.

- **Invite a guest.** Don't be afraid to bring in someone new. Guests can add to the fabric of the group as a whole—just remember to socialize before or after the meeting in order to keep the discussions on topic.

- **Show some respect.** Allow others in the group to finish their sentences; don't dominate the dialogue. "Remember: hating a book speaks more of the reader, than the book itself."

- **Try the occasional "difficult" book.** Jacobsohn calls these meetings a "group grope." Why not struggle in unison while contemplating Quentin Compson's suicide in a masterpiece such as "The Sound and the Fury?"

("No Jacket Required" continued)

form on the HarperCollins Web site are entered in a lottery. Winning clubs have a live speakerphone exchange with a featured author. Writers in the program have included Joyce Carol Oates and Jonathan Safran Foer. Vintage Books, known as a pioneer in working with groups, also has such a program. Its ambitious Web site includes almost a hundred and fifty reading guides, author interviews, newsletters, and links to literary resources. Author Chris Bohjalian ("The Buffalo Soldier," "Midwives," as well as his latest, "Before You Know Kindness") frequently interacts with book clubs and has made special appearances at such bookstores as Schuler Books & Music, with some hundred and sixty-odd registered book groups. Smartly, Schuler contacted those clubs whose members had discussed Bohjalian's earlier works in their previous meetings, and managed to pack the in-store event.

Book clubs show no signs of peaking, much less decline. They do, however, seem to operate cyclically: there's a spurt in the months after Labor Day, then a slight drop-off as time wears on. But then the cycle continues. As Bohjalian writes in his biography on the Vintage site, "The current renaissance in reading groups seems to me to be a wondrous indication that serious books are not in serious trouble at all. Book groups have reminded us of a fact we try and teach our preschool and elementary school children all the time, but that as grownups we all too often tend to forget: reading is meant to be fun. It is capable of evoking from us the same conversational enthusiasm as movies and music and stage plays, if we only give the notion a chance."

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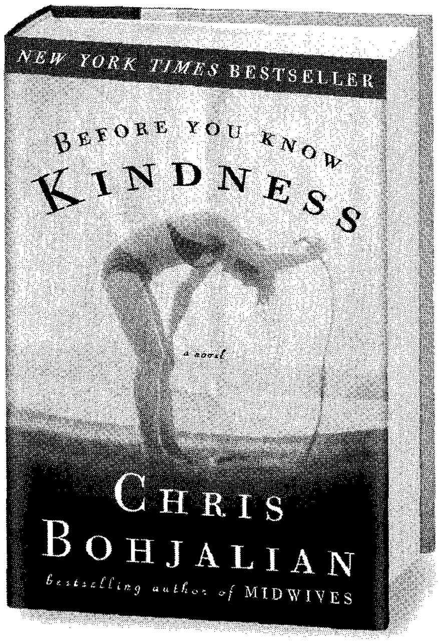
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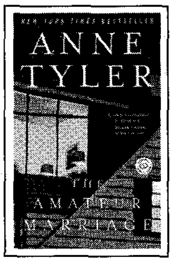
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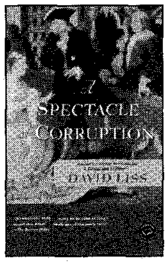
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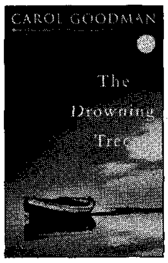
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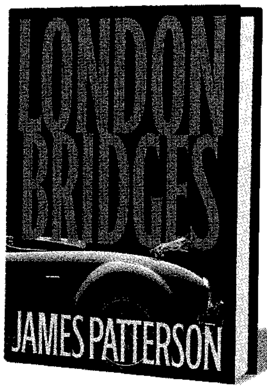
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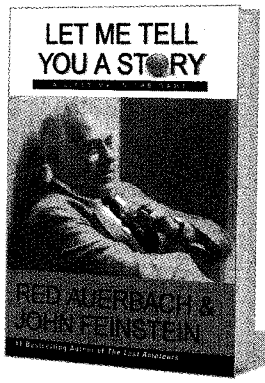
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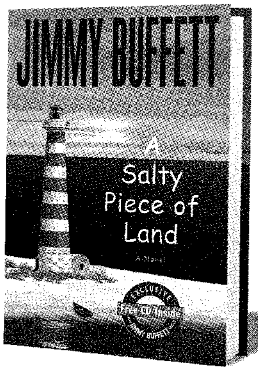
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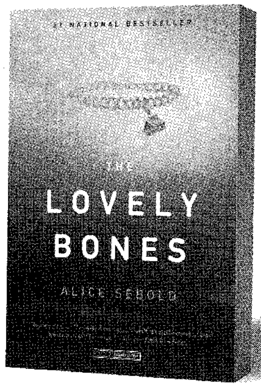
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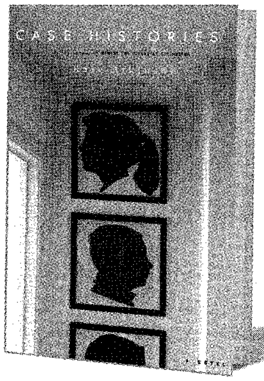
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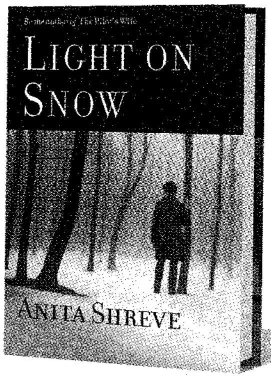
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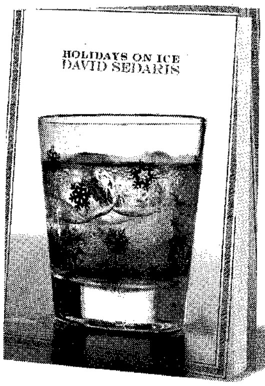
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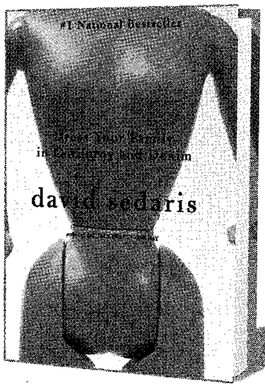
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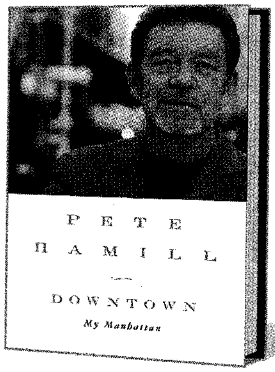
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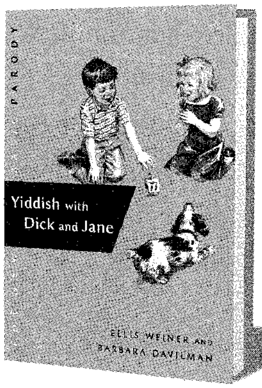
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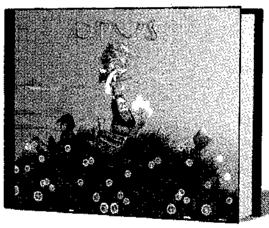
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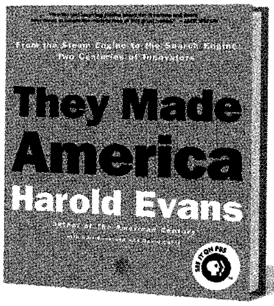
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dure of proving who I am, part of the degradation.

I imagine him fucking me.

I imagine being Helene and being fucked by him thirty-one years ago.

I imagine something profoundly sad.

It is the strangest set of imaginings, and I can tell that he has them, too.

I have read about this; it is not unusual for the primal experiences of parent and child to morph—the intensity, the intimacy of the sensations is often expressed in adults as sexual attraction. But, while the attraction may be common, obviously it cannot be explored.

He asks me if I've spoken with her recently.

"Yes," I say. "Have you?"

He nods.

"She wants to visit me," I tell him. "She sends letters with fantasies about going to the Central Park Zoo, for walks by the ocean, out to dinner. She has no understanding of how strange this is for me. And she's unrelenting—she could take over my life, she could swallow me whole."

He smiles. "She's a stubborn lady."

"She wants to know when the three of us can have dinner together."

He nods and says nothing.

"Maybe you two should have dinner sometime?"

Stan blushes. "I don't think so." He shakes his head, as if to say, You know what would happen. If he so much as saw her again, they would be back at it. He is still afraid of the power she has over him. I have the sense that he has promised himself or, more, that he has promised his wife that he won't see her.

He shifts in his chair. He is always uncomfortable.

"Old injuries," he says. "From the war, from football. I can't sit still for very long."

There is a pause.

"My wife is jealous of you," he says.

I nod.

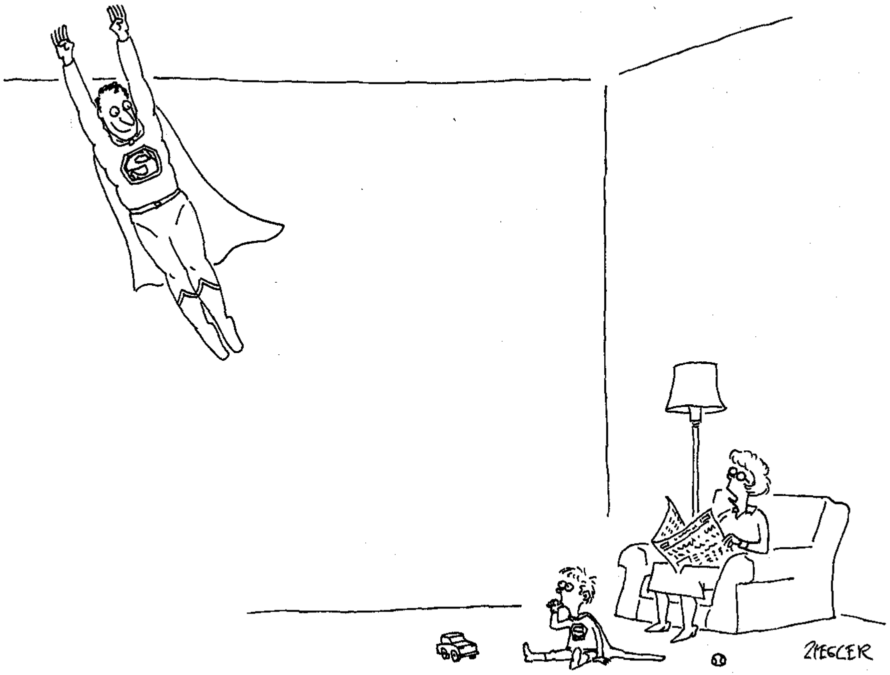
On the rare occasions when I call Stan and his wife answers the phone, she never acknowledges who I am. She never says anything beyond "Hold the line," and then goes off in search of him.

There are times when I'm tempted to say something to her, something simple, like "And how are you?" or "I'm sorry for all the trouble," but then I remember that it is not my responsibility. I can't do all the work.

"Hold the line."

Helene thinks I'm her mother; Stan thinks I'm Helene; and Stan's wife thinks I'm the mistress reincarnate.

I am in the emergency room with my grandmother, who has fallen and broken her hip. I'm checking my messages while waiting for the radiologist to read her X-rays. Stan has called.



"Oh, for pity's sake, wouldn't he be better off learning to walk first?"

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**The Observer* (London)

By the time I get back to my parents' house, it's late.

Stan answers the phone. "How are you?" he asks.

I tell him about my grandmother.

"I have some information for you," he says.

I say nothing. I am not in the mood for games.

"The test results," he says.

"Do you want to tell me something?" I ask.

"Should we meet at the hotel?"

"Which hotel?"

"The one in Rockville."

"Sure," I say. "But why don't you just tell me what the results are?"

"Everything is fine," he says.

"What does that mean?"

"Everything is fine. We'll talk when I see you. Tomorrow at four?"

Everything is not fine. My patience is running thin. All of this is a game, a game that Helene and Stan are playing, and I'm the ball in the middle, being tossed back and forth. He's only making it worse, throwing in a night of suspense for me to spend wondering. More than wondering if he is or isn't my father, I wonder why I keep going back for more. I will never know the whole story. There is an enormous amount that no one is telling me.

I meet him at the hotel. We are in the fern bar, the glassy atrium—the scene is like something from a science-fiction movie, a futuristic bio-environment.

"I have the results of the DNA test," he says.

"Yes."

The waitress arrives and takes our order.

"I'm fine," I tell her.

"Not even some tea?" Stan asks.

"Not even tea," I say.

"Water?" the waitress asks.

"No."

Stan waits until his ginger ale arrives before he says anything.

"The test says it's ninety-nine-point-nine-per-cent likely that I'm your father." There is a pause. "So what are my responsibilities?" he asks.

I am not a slice of pie.

"So what are my responsibilities?" he asks again.

I don't reply.

Stan doesn't tell me how he is going to take me into his family, or give me the large gift behind Door No. 3. He sips his drink and stares at me.

"Now that I'm your father, I think I have the right to ask—are you dating anyone?"

"No." I am unsure whether I am answering the question or refusing to answer.

"Have you told your children?" I ask.

"Not yet," he says.

I'm wondering if he meets his other children for tea in cheap hotels.

We leave without saying goodbye, without a plan for what will happen next.

Just after New Year's, 1994, Helene calls and asks, "When will you see me?"

I say, "Saturday."

She is shocked. So am I. But, in some way, it feels inevitable. How much longer can it go on: *When will you see me? Why won't you see me?* We need to meet in an agreed-upon way—and not a kamikaze attack like the scene in the bookstore. There is no good time, no right time. I am repelled, but I am also curious.

Helene gets too excited. "Where will we meet? What will we do?" She envisions the meeting as a fun-filled day in New York: horse-drawn carriages, ice-cream sodas, tickets to a musical.

I'm thinking an hour, maybe two. I'm thinking a little bit will go a long way.

"Let's meet at the Plaza," she says. "At the Oyster Bar."

The Plaza is a part of the fantasy—home of Eloise, four-o'clock tea, a tourist attraction. The last time I was there, Zsa Zsa Gabor was trying to talk the man at the lobby candy store into giving her free chocolates.

"Will you let her kiss you hello?" a friend asks.

"I don't think so," I say, and then feel bad. "If she wants to kiss my hand, she can."

I would like to go as myself—not my best self, or even my most average self, but my worst self. In the end, I dress up. I am once again compelled to try to make a good impression. In a fantasy of my own, I want her to see how well I turned out, to be proud of me.

In the hallway outside the Oyster Bar, she is wearing a fluffy white fur jacket, a printed silk blouse, and slacks, her hair piled high on her head in a post-beehive bun. She looks like someone from another decade—a woman who believes in glamour, who listens to Burt Bacharach and Dinah Shore to cheer herself up. I suspect that this is how she used to dress to meet my father—probably also in hotels—but now she's fifty-five years old, and a lot has been lost to time.

"Is that you?" she asks, breathless.

I nod.

"I can't believe it," she says, her voice escalating beyond giddy and into a husky sort of mania. "I can't believe I'm seeing you."

She takes my hand and kisses it.

I follow her into the restaurant. She orders a Harveys Bristol Cream. I order a Coke. I have never seen someone drink Harveys Bristol Cream. I know it only from ads—suave couples in front of a fireplace, drinking Harveys.

I feel suddenly defensive; under her gaze, I sense that I am not measuring up. She is sitting there in her old rabbit jacket, and I am across from her in my best clothes. She never graduated from high school, and I have multiple master's degrees. I tell myself that it is not about surfaces. I tell myself that everything will be all right.

"I'm having lobster," she says.

"And what will you have?" the waiter asks.

"Nothing. I will have nothing." I have nothing. I am nothing. Nothing suits me fine.

She talks about Atlantic City. She says that she has left her job—I don't know if that means that she quit or was fired—and is going to open a beauty parlor with a couple of "wonderful operators." She talks and talks, without seeming to be aware that the person sitting across from her is both her only child and a complete stranger.

Her lobster arrives. She pulls meat from the claw, dips it into a silver pot of butter, and pops it into her mouth. She brings the claw to her eye, looking to see if there is more. I wonder how she can eat. I can barely breathe.

"Did your father send you something for your birthday?" she asks. "He was going to send you something very nice."

He sent me a ten-dollar gold-plated locket that would have been appropriate for an eight-year-old. The gift, apparently, was her idea—they discussed it beforehand.

"I have to go soon," I say.

Her lobster finished, she removes her bib, takes out a cigarette case, and extracts a long, thin cigarette. "Will you ever forgive me?" she asks.

"For what?"

"For giving you away."

"I forgive you," I say. "You absolutely did the right thing. Really. I have to go." I flee, leaving the woman in the rabbit coat alone with her Harveys Bristol Cream.

I will never see her again. Somehow I know that.

On Valentine's Day, the phone rings. "You can just go to the roof of your building and jump off."

"Helene?"

"I'm angry with you, can you tell?"

"Yes."

"You didn't send me a valentine," she says.

"I didn't know I was supposed to," I say. "I didn't send anyone a valentine."

"Well, all you had to do was go to the store and pick one out."

"I'm not really sure why you're so angry."

"You don't take good care of me. You should adopt me and take good care of me," she says.

"I can't adopt you," I say.

"Why not?"

I don't know how to respond. "You're scaring me" is all I can manage.

By that fall, Stan still hasn't told his children about me. He is selling his house, moving to Florida. I write to tell him how disappointed I am that he has not done what he promised. My life has been painful enough—I have worked too hard to get where I am in the world to be kept a secret, to be something that he is embarrassed about.

The letter is intercepted by Stan's youngest son, prompting a family crisis. Stan never mentions the letter to me. We drift—estranged.

In the middle of the winter, Helene calls—"You'd better call your father. I don't think he's going to last."

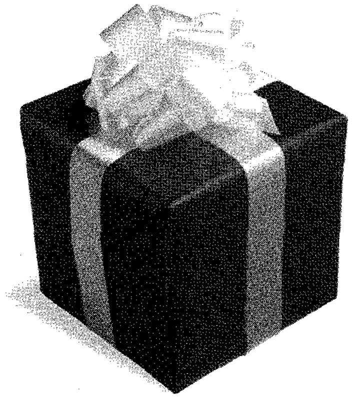
They now have more of a relationship with each other than they do with me, the intensity of their ongoing interest a testament to the power of the attraction.

I send Stan a note, I get no answer. I don't know if he's dead or alive.

In December, 1997, a week before my birthday, Helene sends me a birthday card—it's a putrid pale-pink with roses, the color of femininity, of a box of sanitary napkins. I have now come to loathe my birthday, to live in fear of whatever it might bring.

Dear Daughter

This card is being sent early as I am not sure that I will still be here on the 18th of December. I go to Jefferson Hospital on December 4 for a kidney procedure. What the outcome will be I don't know. I am very



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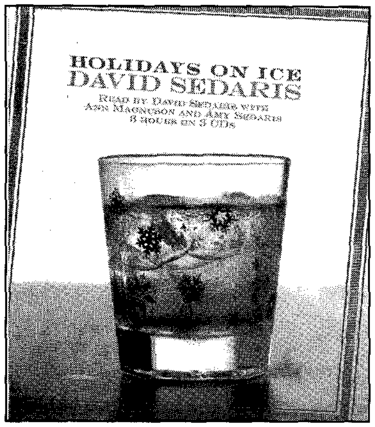
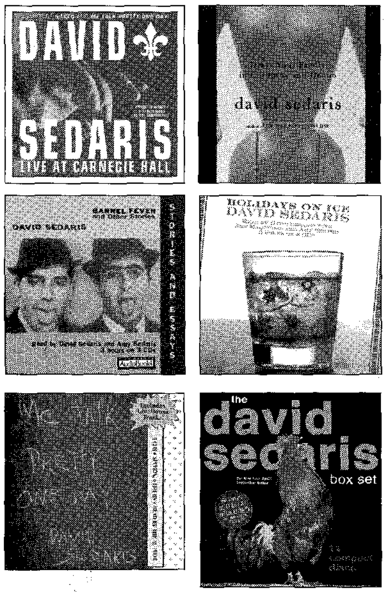


HOLIDAYS ON ICE...

AND ON AUDIO



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scared about the whole situation. I have Chronic Renal Failure. Jefferson is in Philadelphia, PA.

Printed on the card—one of Hallmark's best—is: "I remember the first time I said, 'I love you' to your face (I meant it for the rest of you as well). You had just been born, and I thought you were the most beautiful thing on earth. And in that little face of yours, I thought I could see the future. It looked beautiful, too."

I call her.

"I cancelled the procedure," she says, explaining that it was some sort of diagnostic kidney test and that she was scared to do it alone.

I know I am supposed to offer to go with her. But I don't. She asks if I've heard from my father. I say no. We talk briefly and then I find an excuse to get off the phone.

For her birthday, the following April, I send flowers—I have done this every year since she found me. This year I get no thank-you call. I call the florist to be sure that the flowers were received. I'm told that she sent them back and exchanged them for a plant.

It is summer, 1998. I am on Long Island in a small rented house. It is early evening. I am talking to my mother when her call waiting beeps. She is gone a long time. "Hold on to your hat," she says, coming back onto the line. "Helene is dead."

I am on the phone talking to my mother when she gets a call telling her that my mother is dead. It's a little too much like a Gertrude Stein line.

The woman who delivered the news was a friend of Helene's. I call for more information. She tells me that it was kidney disease. Helene was in the hospital for dialysis, but apparently she checked herself out, against medical advice, went home, and was found "moribund" on her sofa. She tells me that Helene's brother was notified of her death and left the body in the Atlantic City morgue for five days, because he was busy at the U.S. Open, in Flushing Meadows.

"He wasn't playing in it, was he?" a friend later asks.

I call my lawyer and ask him to let Stan know. I don't want to be the one to break the news or deal with his reaction to it. The lawyer, ever professional, reports back that Stan "appreciated the news, asked after you, and said to tell you that he'd like to talk to you whenever you're ready."

I drive to Atlantic City with no idea what to expect. Helene wanted a Jewish funeral. Instead, she gets a rent-a-minister in gray polyester pants presiding over a grave in the cheap part of an Atlantic City cemetery, close to the airport. There are only four seats set up. Her brother, my uncle, arrives with his wife. I extend a hand toward him.

"Remind me," he says, knowing full well who I am. "What's your name?"

I ask if any other relatives are buried in this cemetery.

"No," he says.

The minister does his thing, and I find myself nodding along, saying Amen to everything, and trying to make a good impression on my uncle. The grave is open, waiting, the casket next to it, unadorned. I realize that I was half expecting a large show of flowers from Stan, something in the shape of a horseshoe.

After the funeral, I buy a map and drive around Atlantic City, going to each of the addresses on Helene's letters in chronological order. It is a downward spiral, ending in a prefabricated, semi-detached town house. At each location, I take photographs—I collect information, images to organize, to comfort myself.

At the last house I get out; I go to the door; I ring the bell—why? There are tomato plants growing outside, filled with ripening fruit. There are lights on inside. Through the kitchen window, I can see an inhaler on the counter, some cans of Ensure, a lighter, bottles of pills, packages of food. In the living room, there is something green: a plant decorated with blinking out-of-season Christmas lights. Is that the plant?

A week later, Helene's lawyer and executor, who was absent from her funeral, agrees to let me into her house and tells me that I can take whatever I want. I rent a car and bring some boxes, some plastic bags, and two friends. The house seems to have been ransacked—it's clear that the executor has already gone through it. There are candles but no candlesticks, plates but no silverware, and the copper pots and pans I saw through the window are gone. The place is filled with stuff, cheap stuff:

crocheted afghans, weird plastic dolls with music-box bases, supplies from the beauty shop, which failed. In the front closet, I find another fur, a stole, with her initials sewn into the underside. I imagine that it was her prize possession, that Stan gave it to her. It must have seemed glamorous when she got it. Now it looks old, mangy. I leave it there. Instead, I take pieces of paper; a receipt for a diamond ring from 1963; an old packet of what look like birth-control pills; an arrest warrant; a package from Saks that must have arrived recently; two pairs of rubbery "slimming" underwear with the tags still on, one in black, one in flesh color.

In her bedroom, her pants are hanging over a chair—black jeans, not unlike the ones I often wear. They still hold the creases of her body. I put my hand in the pocket. There is a wad of money, loose bills. This is exactly the way I keep my money. It's the one thing my mother is always on me about: No one keeps their money like that. Don't you want to keep it in a purse? The wad is thick, jammed down into the bottom of the pocket. It creeps me out, this indescribable subtlety of biology.

When I leave, I put four boxes of assorted paper into the car. I have no idea what it might add up to. The boxes come back to New York and I put them straight into storage, knowing that at some point I will open them and once again the great calculator of fact and fiction will begin to whirr—the picture will shift and there will be new pieces to plug into the story.

A couple of months later, I call Stan. It's the first time we've spoken since Helene's death. He tells me that he saw her in Washington not long before she died. I have no idea if this was the first time they'd seen each other in thirty years or if they'd been seeing each other repeatedly since their independent "reunions" with me. He tells me that he knew she was sick. The doctor had told her that she needed a kidney and, according to Stan, Helene wanted him to ask me for one. He says he told her that they couldn't ask me for any favors, on account of how they'd never done anything for me. I have no doubt that he's lying—odds are that Stan, unable to deal with Helene, simply agreed to ask me and then told Helene that I'd said no. That would explain a lot. It would explain why I didn't hear from her before she died.

I tell Stan that I've had enough, that I can't do this again, that I don't want one day to get a phone call summoning me to another church, where I'll stand in the back and witness friends and family mourning the passing of a man I never really knew but was somehow a part of.

"I understand," he says. "Call me. Call me in the car. My wife isn't in the car very often. We can talk."

"I'm not your mistress," I say. "I'm your daughter. And I'm not calling you in your car."

"Fine thing," he replies. ♦

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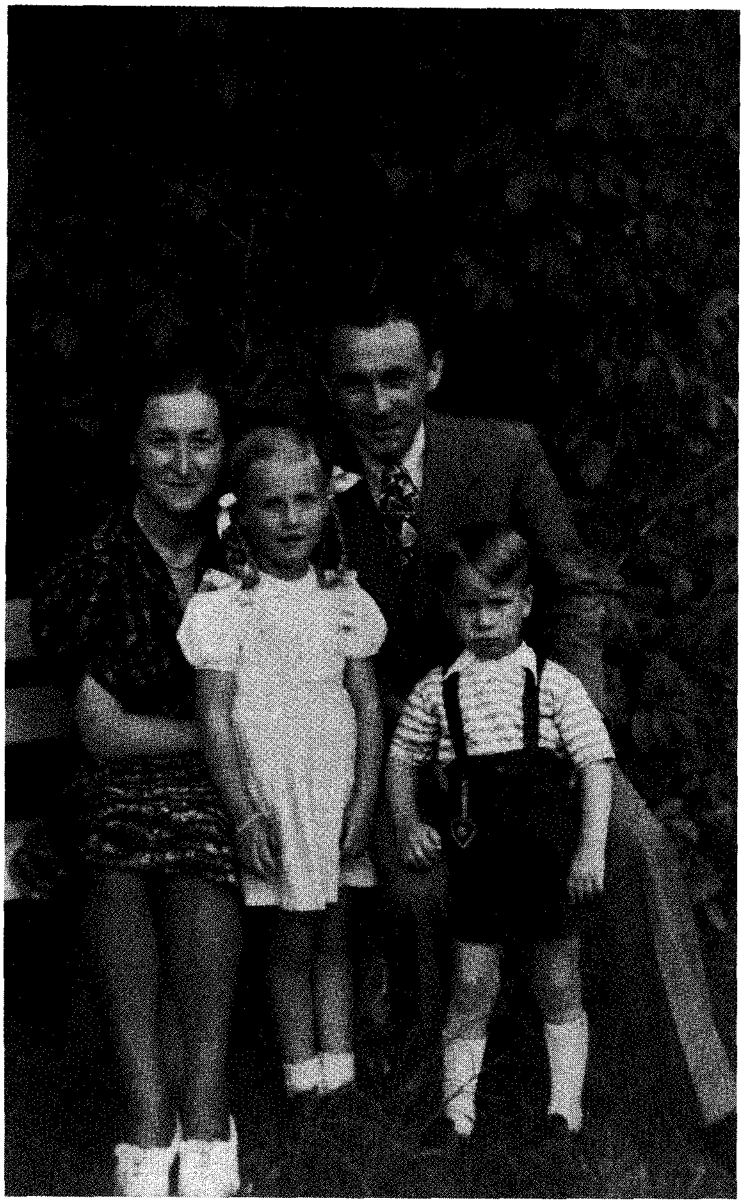
REFLECTIONS

AN ATTEMPT AT RESTITUTION

A memory of a German city.

BY W. G. SEBALD



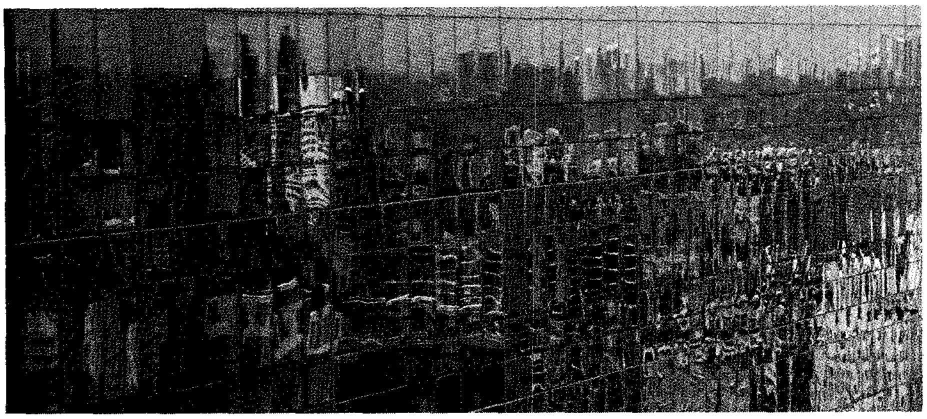
ESTATE OF W. G. SEBALD/THE WYLIE AGENCY

I can still see us in the days before Christmas, 1949, in our living room above the Engelwirt Inn in Wertach. My sister was eight at the time, I was five, and neither of us had yet really got accustomed to our father, who, since his return from a French P.O.W. camp, in February, 1947, had been employed in the local town of Sonthofen as a manager (as he put it), and was at home only from Saturday to midday on Sunday. In front of us, open on the table, lay the new Quelle mail-order catalogue, the first I had ever seen, containing what seemed to me a fairy-tale assortment of wares, from which it was decided in the course of the evening and after long discussions, in which our father got his sensible way, to order a pair of camel's-hair slippers with metal buckles for each of us children. I think zip fastenings were still quite rare at the time.

But in addition to the camel's-hair slippers we ordered a card game called the Cities Quartet, based on pictures of the cities of Germany, and we often played it during the winter months, either when our father was at home or when there was another visitor to make a fourth. Have you got Oldenburg? we asked. Have you got Wuppertal? Have you got Worms? I learned to read from these names, which I had never heard before. I remember that it was a long time before I could imagine anything about these cities—so different did they sound from the local place names of Kranzegg, Jungholz, and Unterjoch—except the sights shown on the cards in the game: the giant Roland of Bremen; the Porta Nigra, in Trier; Cologne Cathedral; the Crane Gate, in Danzig; the fine houses around a large square in Breslau.

In fact, in the Cities Quartet, as I reconstruct it from memory, Germany was still undivided—at the time, of course, I thought nothing of that—and not only undivided but intact, for the uniformly dark-brown pictures of the cities, which gave me at an early age the idea of a dark fatherland, showed the cities of Germany without exception as they had been before the war: the intricate gables below the citadel of the Nürnberger Burg; the half-timbered houses of Brunswick; the Holsten Gate of the old town in Lübeck; the Zwinger and the Brühl terraces, in Dresden.

The Cities Quartet marked not only the beginning of my career as a reader but the start of my passion for geography, which emerged soon after I began school—a delight in topography which became increasingly compulsive as my life went on and to which I have devoted endless hours bending over atlases and brochures of every kind. Inspired by the Cities Quartet, I soon found Stuttgart on a map. I saw that compared with the other German cities it was not too far from us. But I could not imagine a journey to it, any more than I could think what the city itself might look like, for whenever I thought of Stuttgart all I could see was the picture of Stuttgart Central Station on one of the cards in the game: a bastion of natural stone designed



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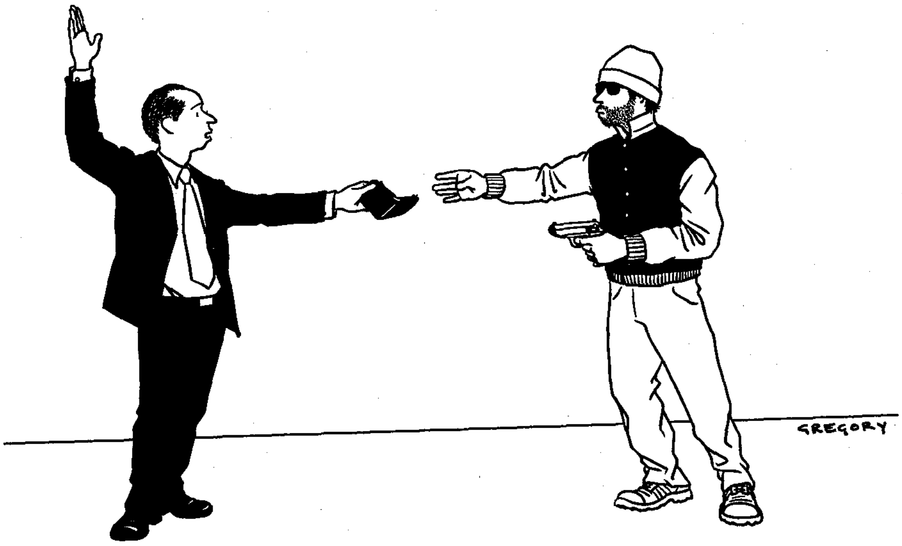


"Use the platinum card—I need the miles."

by the architect Paul Bonatz before the First World War, as I later learned, and completed soon after it, a building that in its angular brutalist architecture already to some extent anticipated what was to come, perhaps even, if I may be permitted so fanciful a mental leap, anticipated the few lines written by an English schoolgirl of about fifteen (judging by the clumsy handwriting) on holiday in Stuttgart to a Mrs. J. Winn, in Saltburn-by-the-Sea, in the county of Yorkshire, on the back of a picture postcard, which came into my hands at the end of the nineteen-sixties in a Salvation Army junk shop in Manchester, and which shows three other tall buildings in Stuttgart as well as Bonatz's railway station, curiously enough from exactly the same viewpoint as in our long-lost German Cities Quartet game.

Betty, for that was the name of the girl spending the summer in Stuttgart, writes on August 10, 1939, barely three weeks before the outbreak of the Second World War—when my father was already approaching the Polish border in Slovakia with his convoy of trucks—that the people in Stuttgart are very friendly, and she has "been out tramping, sunbathing and sightseeing, to a German birthday party, to the pictures and to a festival of the Hitler Youth."

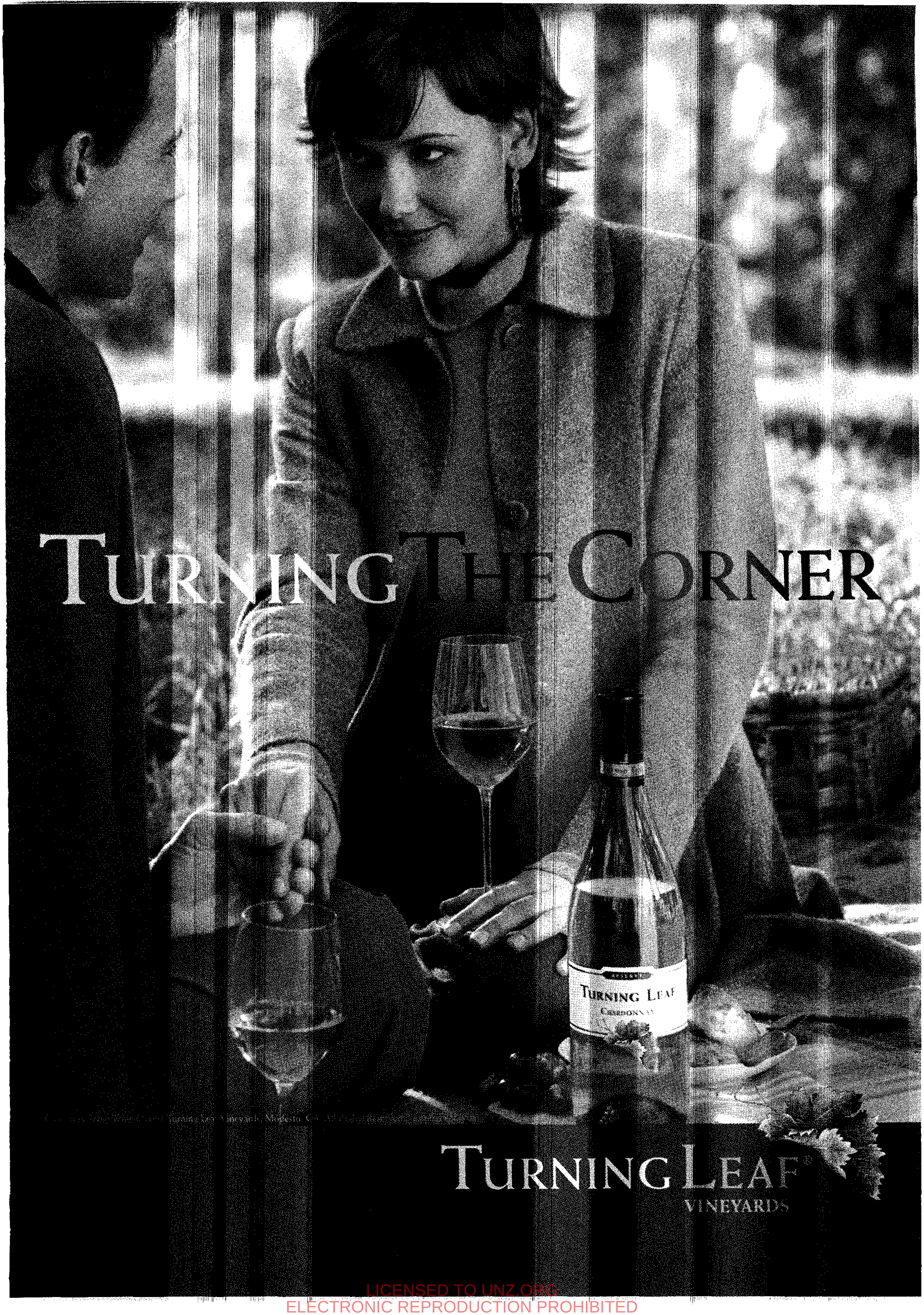
I acquired this card, with the picture of the railway station and the message on the back, on one of my long walks through the city of Manchester, before I had ever been to Stuttgart. When I was growing up in the Allgäu in the postwar period you did not travel much, and if you did go for an outing now and then as the "economic miracle" set in, it was by bus to the Tyrol, to Vorarlberg, or at most into Switzerland. There was no call for excursions to Stuttgart or any of the other cities that still looked so badly damaged, and so until I left my native land at the age of twenty-one it was still largely unknown territory to me, remote and with something not quite right about it.

It was May, 1976, when I first got out of a train at Bonatz's station, for someone had told me that the painter Jan Peter Tripp, with whom I had been to school in Oberstdorf, was living in Reinsburgstrasse in Stuttgart. I remember that visit to him as a remarkable occasion, because with the admiration I immediately felt for Tripp's work it also occurred to me that I, too, would like to do something one day other than giving lectures and holding seminars. At the time, Tripp gave me a present of one of his engravings, showing the mentally ill judge Daniel Paul Schreber with a spider in his skull—what can there be more terrible than the ideas always scurrying around our minds?—and much of what I have written since derives from this engraving, even in my method of procedure: in adhering to an exact historical perspective, in patiently engraving and linking together apparently disparate things in the manner of a still-life.

I have kept asking myself since then what the invisible connections that determine our lives are, and how the threads run. What, for instance, links my visit to Reinsburgstrasse with the fact that in the years immediately after the war it was the site of a camp for so-called displaced persons, a place that was raided on March 20, 1946, by about a hundred and eighty Stuttgart police officers, in the course of which, although the raid discovered nothing but a black-market trade in a few hen's eggs, several shots were fired and one of the camp inmates, who had only just been reunited with his wife and two children, lost his life.

Why can I not get such episodes out of my mind? Why when I take the S-Bahn toward Stuttgart's city center do I think, every time we reach Feuersee Station, that the fires are still blazing above us, and that since the terrors of the last war years, even though we have rebuilt our surroundings so wonderfully well, we have been living in a kind of underground zone? Why did it seem to the traveller on a winter night, coming from Möhringen and getting his first sight from the back of a taxi of the new administrative complex of the firm of Daimler, that the network of lights glittering in the darkness was like a constellation of stars spreading all over the world, so that these Stuttgart stars are visible not only in the cities of Europe and on the boulevards of Beverly Hills and Buenos Aires but wherever columns of trucks with their cargoes of refugees move along the dusty roads, obviously never stopping, in the zones of devastation that are always spreading somewhere—in Sudan, Kosovo, Eritrea, or Afghanistan?

And how far is it from the point where we find ourselves today back to the late eighteenth century, when the hope that mankind could improve and learn was inscribed in handsomely formed letters in our philosophical firmament? At the time, Stuttgart, nestling amid vineyards and overgrown slopes, was a little place of around twenty thousand souls, some of whom, as I once read, lived on the top floors of the towers of the collegiate church. One of the sons of the region, Friedrich Hölderlin, proudly addresses this small, still sleepy little Stuttgart, where cattle were driven to the marketplace early in the morning to drink from the black marble fountains, as the princess of his native land, and asks her, as if he already guessed at the coming dark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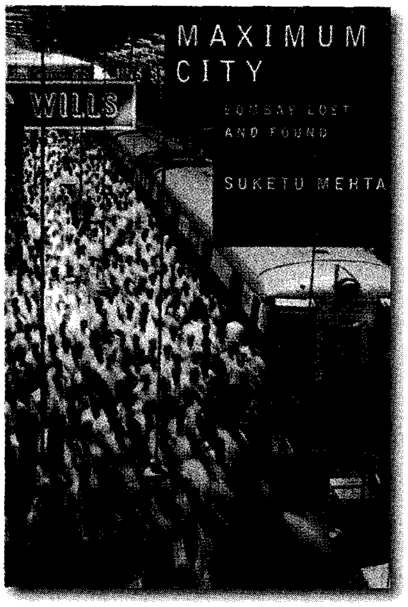
turn that history and his own life would take: "Receive me kindly, stranger that I am." Gradually an epoch of violence then unfolds, and with it comes personal misfortune. The giant strides of the Revolution, Hölderlin writes, present a monstrous spectacle. The French forces invade Germany. The army in Sambre-Maas moves toward Frankfurt, where after heavy bombardment the utmost confusion reigns. Hölderlin, with the Gontard household, has fled that city for Kassel, by way of Fulda. On his return, he is increasingly torn between his wishful imaginings and the real impossibility of his love, which transgresses against the class system. Yes, he sits for days on end with Susette in the garden cabinet or the arbor, but he feels the humiliating aspect of his position to be all the more oppressive. So he must leave again. He has gone on so many walking tours in his life of barely thirty years, in the Rhone mountains, the Harz, to the Knochenberg, to Halle and Leipzig, and now, after the Frankfurt fiasco, back to Nürtingen and Stuttgart.

Soon afterward, he sets off again to Hauptwil, in Switzerland, accompanied by friends through the wintry Schönbuch to Tübingen, then alone up the rugged mountain and down the other side, on the lonely road to Sigmaringen. It is twelve hours' walk from there to the lake. A quiet journey across the water. The next year, after a brief stay with his family, he is on the road again, through Colmar, Isenheim, Belfort, Besançon, and Lyons, going west and southwest, passing through the lowlands of the upper Loire in mid-January, crossing the dreaded heights of the Auvergne, deep as they are in snow, going through storms and wilderness until he finally reaches Bordeaux. You will be happy here, Consul Meyer tells him on his arrival, but six months later, exhausted, distressed, eyes flickering, and dressed like a beggar, he is back in Stuttgart. *Receive me kindly, stranger that I am.* What, exactly, happened to him? Was it that he missed his love, could he not overcome his social disadvantage, had he after all seen too far ahead in his misfortune? Did he know that the fatherland would turn away from his vision of peace and beauty, that soon those like him would be watched and locked up, and there would be no place for him but the tower? *À quoi bon la littérature?*

Perhaps only to help us to remember, and teach us to understand that some strange connections cannot be explained by causal logic: for instance, the connection between the former princely residence of Stuttgart, later an industrial city, and the French town of Tulle, which is built on seven hills—"*Elle a des prétentions, cette ville,*" a lady living there wrote to me some time ago, "*That town has grand ideas of itself*"—between Stuttgart, then, and Tulle, in the Corrèze region, through which Hölderlin passed on his way to Bordeaux, and where on June 9, 1944, exactly three weeks after I first saw the light of day, in the Seefeld house in Wertach, and almost exactly a hundred and one years to the day after Hölderlin's death, the entire male population of the town was driven together in the grounds of an armaments factory by the S.S. Das Reich division, intent on retribution. Ninety-nine of them, men of all ages, were hanged from the lampposts and balconies of the Souilhac quarter in the course of that dark day, which still overshadows the memories of the town of Tulle. The rest were deported to forced-labor camps and extermination camps, to Natzweiler, Flossenbürg, and Mauthausen, where many were worked to death in the stone quarries.

So what is literature good for? Am I, Hölderlin asked himself, to fare like the thousands who in their springtime days lived in both foreboding and love but were seized by the avenging Parcae on a drunken day, secretly and silently betrayed, to do penance in the dark of an all too sober realm where wild confusion prevails in the treacherous light, where they count slow time in frost and drought, and man still praises immortality in sighs alone? The synoptic view across the barrier of death presented by the poet in these lines is both overshadowed and illuminated, however, by the memory of those to whom the greatest injustice was done. There are many forms of writing; only in literature, however, can there be an attempt at restitution over and above the mere recital of facts, and over and above scholarship. A place that is at the service of such a task is therefore very appropriate in Stuttgart, and I wish it and the city that shelters it well for the future. ♦

(*Translated, from the German, by Anthea Bell. The text of this essay was first delivered as a speech at the opening of the House of Literature, in Stuttgart, in 2001.*)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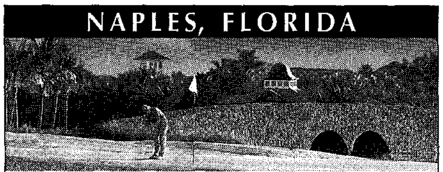
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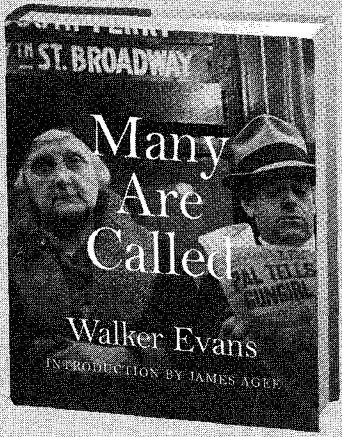
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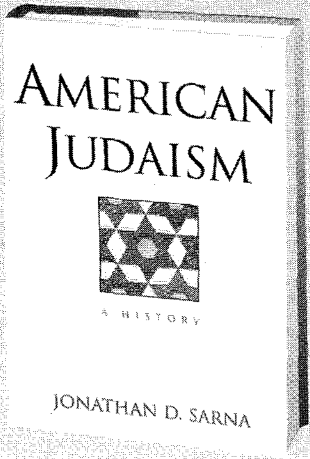
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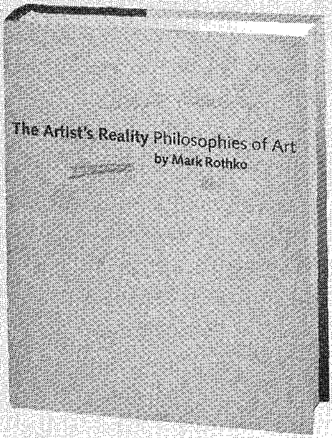
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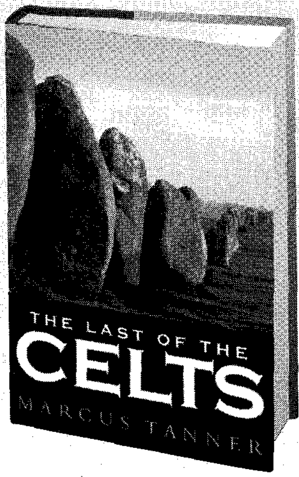
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BY IAN McEWAN

COURTESY GILBERT & GEORGE, "NIGHT VIEW" (1978)

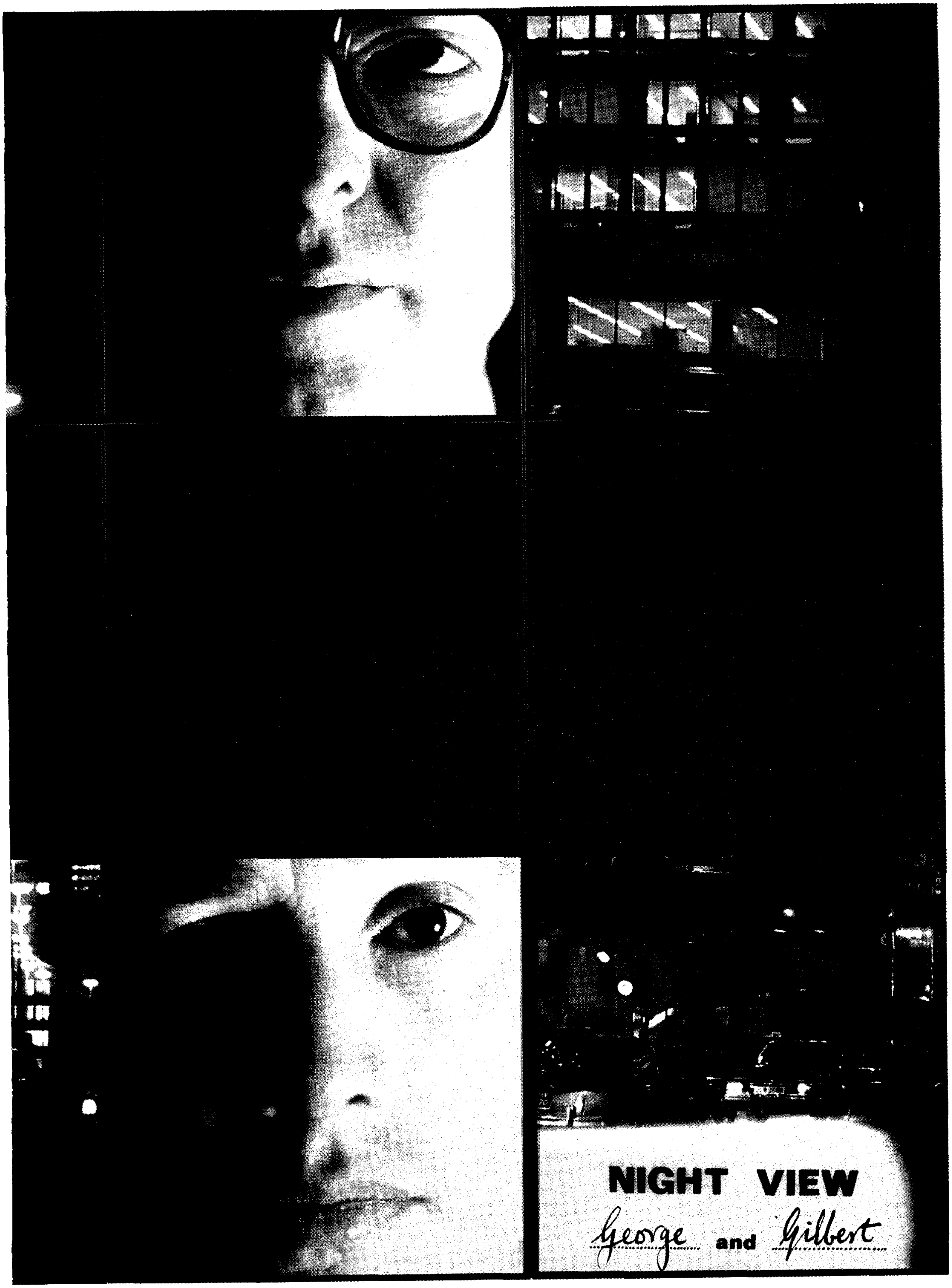
Most people at their first consultation take a furtive look at the surgeon's hands in the hope of reassurance. Prospective patients look for delicacy, sensitivity, steadiness, perhaps unblemished pallor. On this basis, Henry Perowne loses a number of cases each year. Generally, he knows it's about to happen before the patient does: the downward glance repeated, the prepared questions beginning to falter, the overemphatic thanks during the retreat to the door. Other patients don't like what they see but are ignorant of their right to go elsewhere; some note the hands but are placated by the reputation, or don't give a damn; and there are still others who notice nothing, or feel nothing, or are unable to communicate owing to the cognitive impairment that has brought them in the first place.

Perowne himself is not concerned. Let the defectors go along the corridor or across town. Others will take their place. The sea of neural misery is wide and deep. These hands are steady enough, but they are large. Had he been a proper pianist—he's dabbled inexpertly—his ten-note span might be of use. They are knobby hands, bulging with bone and sinew at the knuckles, with a thatch of gingerish hair at the base of each finger, the tips of which are flat and broad, like the suckers on a salamander. There's an immodest length to the thumbs, which curve back, banana style, and even at rest have a double-jointed look, more suited to the circus ring, among the clowns and trapezists. And the hands, like much of the rest of Perowne, are gaily freckled in a motley of orange and brown melanin extending right up to his highest knuckles. To a certain kind of patient, this looks alien, even unwholesome: you might not want such hands, even gloved, tinkering with your brain.

This week, he was pushed hard by a flu outbreak among the hospital staff—his operating list was twice the usual length. By means of balancing and doubling, he was able to perform major surgery in one theatre, supervise a senior registrar in another, and perform minor procedures in a third. He has two neurosurgical registrars on his team at present—Sally Madden, who is almost qualified and entirely reliable, and a year-two registrar, Rodney Browne, from Guyana, gifted, hardworking, but still unsure of himself. Perowne's consultant anesthetist, Jay Strauss, has his own registrar, Gita Syal. For three days, keeping Rodney at his side, Perowne moved between the three suites—the sound of his own clogs on the corridor's polished floors and the various squeaks and groans of the theatre swing doors sounded like orchestral accompaniments.

Friday's list was typical. While Sally closed up one patient, Perowne went next door to relieve an elderly lady of her trigeminal neuralgia, her tic douloureux. These minor operations can still give him pleasure—he likes to be fast and accurate. He slipped a gloved forefinger into the back of her mouth to feel the route, then, with barely a glance at the image intensifier, slid a long needle through the outside of her cheek, all the way up to the trigeminal ganglion. Jay came in from next door to watch Gita bringing the lady to brief consciousness. An electrical impulse at the needle's tip caused a tingling in her face, and once she'd drowsily confirmed that the position was correct—Perowne had it right first time—she was put down again while the nerve was "cooked" by radiofrequency thermocoagulation. The delicate trick was to eliminate her pain while leaving her an awareness of light touch—all done in fifteen minutes, three years' misery, of sharp, stabbing pain, ended.

He clipped the neck of a middle-cerebral-artery aneurysm—he's something of a master in the art—and per-

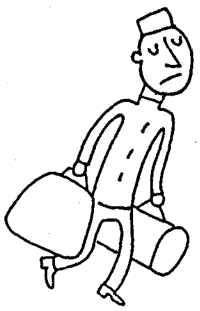

NIGHT VIEW
George and Gilbert

formed a biopsy for a tumor in the thalamus, a region where it's not possible to operate. The patient was a twenty-eight-year-old professional tennis player, already suffering acute memory loss. As Perowne drew the needle clear of the depths of the brain, he could see at a glance that the tissue was abnormal. He held out little hope for radio- or chemotherapy. Confirmation came in a verbal report from the lab, and that afternoon he broke the news to the young man's elderly parents.

The culmination of today's list was the removal of a pilocytic astrocytoma from a fourteen-year-old Nigerian girl who lived in Brixton with her aunt and uncle, a Church of England vicar. The tumor was best reached through the back of the head, by an infratentorial supracerebellar route, with the anesthetized patient in a sitting position. This created special problems for Jay Strauss, for there was a possibility of air entering a vein and causing an embolism.

The Nigerian girl's operation lasted five hours and went well. Andrea was placed in a sitting position. Opening up the back of the head needed great care because of the vessels running close under the bone. Rodney leaned in at Perowne's side to irrigate the drilling and cauterize the bleeding with the bipolar. Finally it lay exposed, the tentorium—the tent—a pale delicate structure of beauty, like the little whirl of a veiled dancer, where the dura is gathered and parted again. Below it lay the cerebellum. By cutting away carefully, Perowne allowed gravity itself to draw the cerebellum down—no need for retractors—and it was possible to see deep into the region where the pineal lay, with the tumor extending in a vast red mass right in front of it. The astrocytoma was well defined and had only partially infiltrated surrounding tissue. Perowne was able to excise almost all of it without damaging any eloquent region.

He allowed Rodney several minutes with the microscope and the sucker, and let him do the closing up. Perowne did the head dressing himself, and when he finally came away from the theatres he wasn't feeling tired at all. Operating never wearies him—once busy within the enclosed world of his team, the theatre and its ordered procedures, and absorbed by the vivid foreshortening of the operating microscope as he follows a corridor to a desired site, he experiences a superhuman capacity, more like a craving, for work.



As for the rest of the week, the two morning clinics made no more demand than usual. He's too experienced to be touched by the varieties of distress he encounters—his obligation is to be useful. Nor did the ward rounds or the various weekly committees tire him. It was the paperwork on Friday afternoon that brought him down, the backlog of referrals, and responses to referrals, abstracts for two conferences, letters to colleagues and editors, an unfinished peer review, contributions to management initiatives, and government changes to the structure of the Trust, and yet more revisions to teaching practices. There's to be a new look—there's always a new look—at the hospital's Emergency Plan. Simple train crashes are no longer all that are envisaged, and words like "catastrophe," "mass fatalities," "chemical and biological warfare," and "major attack" have recently become bland through repetition. In the past year, he's become aware of new committees and subcommittees spawning, and lines of command that stretch up and out of the hospital, beyond the medical hierarchies, up through the distant reaches of the Civil Service to the Home Secretary's office.

Perowne dictated monotonously, and long after his secretary went home he sat typing in his overheated box of an office on the hospital's third floor. What held him back was an unfamiliar lack of fluency. He prides himself on speed and a sleek, wry style. It never needs much forethought—composing and typing are one. Now he was stumbling. And though the professional jargon didn't desert him—it's second nature—his prose accumulated awkwardly. Individual words brought to mind unwieldy objects—bicycles, deck chairs, coat hangers—strewn across his path. He composed a sentence in his head, then lost it on the page, or typed himself into a grammatical cul-de-sac and had to sweat his way out. Whether this debility was the cause or the consequence of fatigue he didn't pause to consider. He was stubborn and he pushed himself to the end. At eight in the evening, he concluded the last in a series of e-mails, and stood up from his desk, where he had been hunched since four. On his way out, he looked in at his patients in the I.C.U. There were no problems, and Andrea was doing fine—she was sleeping and all her signs were good.

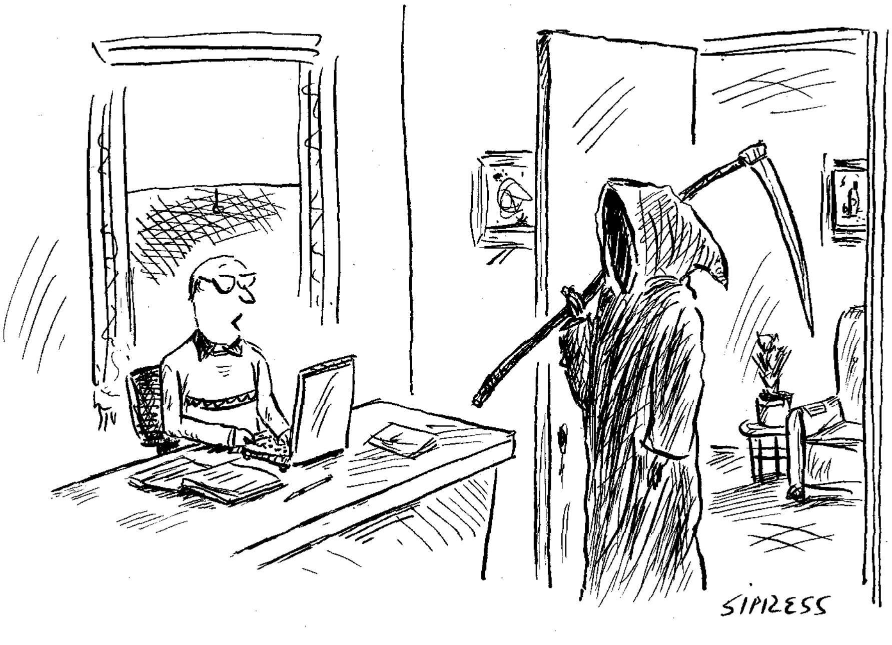
Less than half an hour later, he came home to an empty house and lay in the bath with a book, content to be talking to no one. With one toe occasionally controlling a fresh input of hot water, he listened to the radio news. The stolid Mr. Blix had been addressing the U.N. again—there was a general impression that he had rather undermined the case for war. Afterward, Henry stretched out on the bed to consider his supper, and remembered nothing more. His wife, Rosalind, must have drawn the covers over him when she came in from work. She would have kissed him. Forty-eight years old, profoundly asleep at nine-thirty on a Friday night—this is modern professional life.

He crosses the bedroom and goes to the dressing room, to the corner where he stores his sports gear. These are the small pleasures at the start of a Saturday morning—the promise of coffee, and this faded squash kit. His daughter, Daisy, always a neat dresser, fondly calls it his scarecrow outfit. The blue shorts are bleached by patches of sweat that won't wash out. Over a gray T-shirt, he puts on an old cashmere jumper with moth holes across the chest. Over the shorts, tracksuit pants, fastened with old cord at the waist. The white socks of prickly stretch towelling with yellow and pink bands at the top have something of the nursery about them. Unboxing them releases a homely aroma of the laundry. The squash shoes have a sharp smell, blending the synthetic with the animal, that reminds him of the court, the clean white walls and red lines, the unarguable rules of gladiatorial combat, and the score. It's pointless pretending not to care about the score. He lost last week's game against Jay Strauss, but as he crosses the room with cushioned, springy stride Henry feels he'll win today. He opens the shutters, and the thought is instantly dispersed by the flood of low winter sunlight and by the sudden interest of what's happening outside.

On the far side of the square, two Asian lads in tracksuits—he recognizes them from the newsagent's on Warren Street—are unloading a van onto a handcart on the pavement. Placards are already piled high, and folded banners and cards of lapel buttons and whistles, football rattles and trumpets, funny hats and rubber masks of politicians—Bush and Blair in wobbling stacks, the topmost faces gazing blankly skyward, ghastly white in the sunshine. Gower Street, a few blocks away to the east, will be one of the starting points of the march, and some of the overspill has reached back here. A small crowd around the cart wants to buy stuff before the venders are ready. The general cheerfulness Perowne finds baffling. There are whole families, one with four children, in various sizes of bright-red coats, clearly under instructions to hold hands; and students, and a coachful of graying ladies in quilted anoraks and stout shoes. The Women's Institute, perhaps. One of the tracksuited men holds up his hands in mock surrender; his friend standing on the back of the van makes his first sale. Displaced by the commotion, the square's pigeons take off and wheel and dip in formation. Waiting for them below on a bench by a litter bin is a trembling red-faced man wrapped in a gray blanket with a sliced loaf ready on his lap. Among the Perowne children, "pigeon feeder" is a term synonymous with mentally deficient. Behind the throng around the cart is a bunch of kids in leather jackets and cropped hair, looking on with tolerant smiles. They have already unfurled their banner, which proclaims simply, "Peace Not Slogans!!"

The scene has an air of innocence and English dottiness. Perowne, dressed for combat on court, imagines himself as Saddam, surveying the crowd with satisfaction from some Baghdad ministry balcony: the good-hearted electorates of the Western democracies will never allow their governments to attack his country. But he's wrong. The one thing Perowne thinks he knows about this war is that it's going to happen. With or without the U.N. The troops are in place, they'll have to fight. Ever since he treated an Iraqi professor of ancient history for an aneurysm, saw his torture scars and listened to his stories, Perowne has had ambivalent or confused and shifting ideas about this coming invasion. Miri Taleb is in his late sixties, a man of slight, almost girlish build, with a nervous laugh, a whinnying giggle that could have something to do with his time in prison. He did his Ph.D. at University College, London, and speaks excellent English. His field is Sumerian civilization, and for more than twenty years he taught at the university in Baghdad and was involved in various archeological surveys in the Euphrates area. His arrest came one winter afternoon in 1994, outside a lecture room where he was about to teach. His students were waiting for him inside and did not see what happened. Three men showed their security accreditations, and asked him to go with them to their car. There they handcuffed him, and it was at that point that his torture began. The cuffs were so tight that for sixteen hours, until they were removed, he could think of nothing but the pain. Permanent damage was done to both shoulders. For the following ten months, he was moved around central Iraq between various jails. He had no idea what these moves meant, and no means of letting his wife know he was still alive. Even on the day of his release, he didn't discover what the charges were against him.

Perowne listened in his office to the Professor, and later talked to him in the ward after his operation—fortunately, a complete success. For a man approaching his seventieth birthday, Taleb had an unusual appearance: childlike smooth skin and long eyelashes, and a carefully groomed black mustache—surely dyed. In Iraq, he had no involvement or interest in politics, and declined to join the Baath Party. That may have been the cause of his problems. Equally, it could have been the fact that one of his wife's cousins, long dead, was once a member of the Communist Party, or that another cousin had received a letter from Iran from a friend exiled because of his supposed Iranian descent; or that the husband of a niece had refused to return from a teaching job in Canada. Another possible reason was that the Professor himself had travelled to Turkey to advise on archeological digs. He was not particularly surprised by his arrest, and neither would his wife have been. They both knew, everyone knew, someone who'd been taken in, held for a while, tortured perhaps, and then released. People suddenly turned up at work again, and did not speak about their experiences, and no one dared ask—there were too many informers around, and inappropriate curiosity could get you arrested. Some came back in sealed coffins—it was strictly forbidden to open them. It was common to hear of friends and acquaintances making the rounds



"Thank goodness you're here—I can't accomplish anything unless I have a deadline."

of the hospitals, police stations, and government offices hoping for news of their relatives.

Taleb spent his time in stinking, unventilated cells—six feet by ten with twenty-five men crammed inside. And who were these men? The Professor giggled mirthlessly. Not the expected combination of common criminals mixed in with intellectuals. They were mostly very ordinary people, held for not having a license plate on their car, or because they'd got into an argument with a man who turned out to be a Baath Party official, or because their children had been coaxed at school into reporting their parents' unappreciative remarks at the dinner table about Saddam. Or because they refused to join the Party during one of the many recruitment drives. Another common crime was to have a family member accused of deserting from the Army.

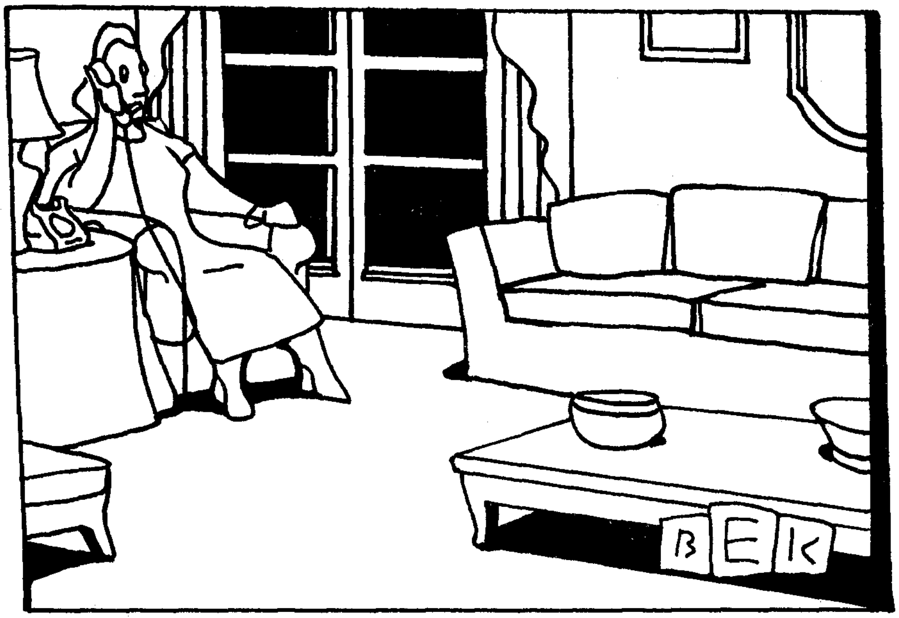
Also in the cells were security officers and policemen. The various security services existed in a state of nervous competition with one another, and agents had to work harder and harder to show how diligent they were. Whole branches of security could come under suspicion. The torture was routine—Miri and his cellmates heard the screaming from their cells, and waited to be called. Beatings, electrocution, anal rape, near-drowning, thrashing the soles of the feet. Everyone, from top officials to street-sweepers, lived in a state of anxiety, constant fear. Henry saw the scars on Miri's buttocks and thighs where he had been beaten with what he thought was a branch of some kind of thornbush. The men who beat him did so without hatred—only with routine vigor. They were scared of their supervisor, who was frightened for his own position, or his future liberty, because of an escape the year before.

"Everyone hates it," Miri told Perowne. "You see, it's only terror that holds the nation together. The whole system runs on fear, and no one knows how to stop it. Now the Americans are coming, perhaps for bad reasons. But Saddam and the Baathists will go. And then, my doctor friend, I will buy you a meal in a good Iraqi restaurant in London."

Perowne takes his keys and phone and garage remote control from a silver dish by the recipe books. His wallet is in an overcoat hanging in a room behind the kitchen, outside the wine vaults. His squash racquet is upstairs on the ground floor, in a cupboard in the laundry. He puts on an old hiking fleece. As he steps outside and turns from closing the door, he hears the squeal of seagulls come inland for the city's good pickings. The sun is low and only half of the square—his half—is in full sunlight. He walks away from the square along blinding moist pavement, surprised by the freshness of the day. The air tastes almost clean. He has an impression of striding along a natural surface, along some coastal wilderness, on a smooth slab of basalt causeway he vaguely recalls from a childhood holiday. It must be the cry of the gulls bringing it back. He can remember the taste of spray off a turbulent blue-green sea, and as he reaches Warren Street he reminds himself that he mustn't forget to go to the fishmonger's. Lifted by the coffee, and by movement at last, as well as the prospect of the game and the comfortable fit of the sheathed racquet in his hand, he increases his pace.

The streets around here are usually empty at weekends, but up ahead, along the Euston Road, a big crowd is making its way east toward Gower Street, and in the road itself, crawling in the eastbound lanes, are coaches nose-to-tail. The passengers are pressed against the glass, longing to be out there with the rest. They've hung their banners from the windows, along with football scarves and the names of towns from the heart of England—Stratford, Gloucester, Evesham. From the impatient pavement crowds, some dry runs with the noisemakers—a trombone, a squeeze-ball car horn, a Lambeg drum. There are ragged practice chants that at first he can't make out. "*Tumty-tumty-tum.*" Don't attack Iraq. Placards not yet on duty are held at a slope, at rakish angles over shoulders. "Not in My Name" goes past a dozen times. Its cloying self-regard suggests a bright new world of protest, with the fussy consumers of shampoos and soft drinks demanding to feel good, or nice. Henry prefers the languid "Down with This Sort of Thing." A placard of one of the organizing groups goes by—the British Association of Muslims. Henry remembers that outfit well. It explained recently in its newspaper that apostasy from Islam was an offense punishable by death. Behind comes a banner proclaiming the Swaffham Women's Choir, and then Jews Against the War.

On Warren Street, he turns right. Now his view is east, toward the Tottenham Court Road. Here's an even bigger crowd, swelled by hundreds disgorging from the tube station. Backlit by the low sun, silhouetted figures break away and merge into a darker mass, but it's still possible to see a makeshift bookstall and a hot-dog stand, cheekily set up on

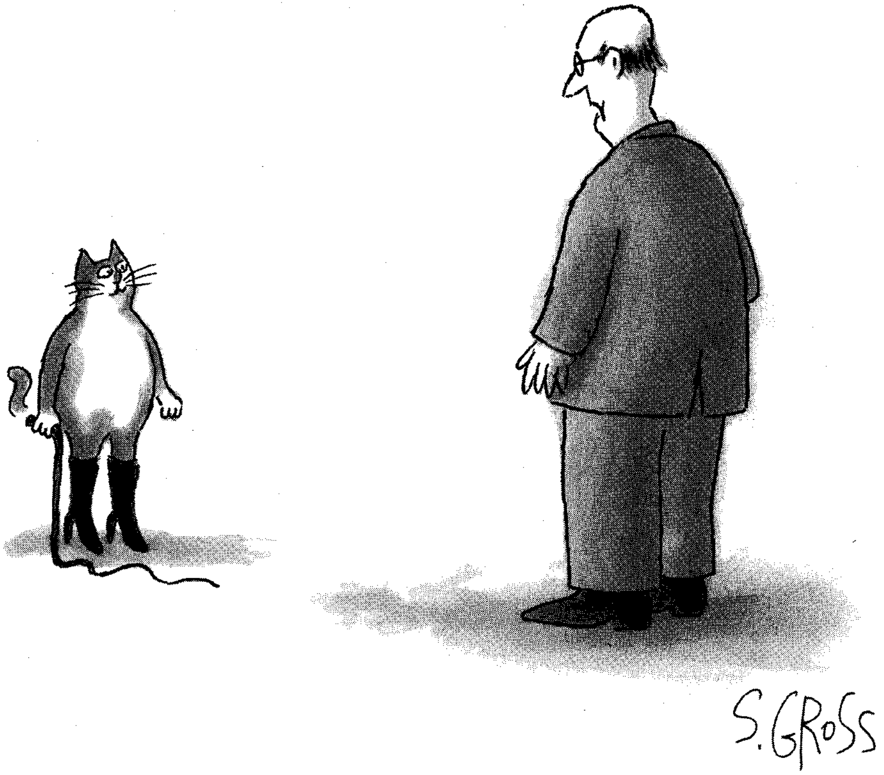


"This has been a really challenging time for me superficially."

the corner right outside McDonald's. It's a surprise, the number of children there are, and babies in strollers. Despite his skepticism, Perowne, in white-soled trainers, gripping his racquet tighter, feels the seduction and excitement peculiar to such events: a crowd possessing the streets, tens of thousands of strangers converging with a single purpose conveying an intimation of revolutionary joy.

He might have been with them—in spirit at least, for nothing now will keep him from his game—if Professor Taleb hadn't needed that aneurysm clipped on his middle cerebral artery. In the months after those conversations with the Professor, Perowne drifted into some compulsive reading up on the regime. He read about the inspirational example of Stalin, and the network of family and tribal loyalties that sustained Saddam, and the palaces handed out as rewards. Henry became acquainted with the details of genocides in the north and south of the country, the ethnic cleansing, the vast system of informers, the bizarre tortures and Saddam's taste for getting personally involved, and the strange punishments passed into law—the brandings and amputations. Naturally, Henry followed closely the accounts of measures taken against surgeons who refused to carry out these mutilations. He concluded that viciousness had rarely been more inventive or systematic or widespread. Miri was right: it was indeed a republic of fear. Henry read Makiya's famous book of that name. It was clear, Saddam's organizing principle was terror.

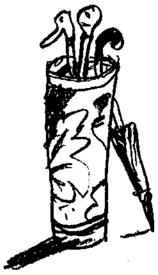
Perowne knows that when a powerful imperium—Assyrian, Roman, American—makes war and claims just cause, history will not be impressed. He also worries that the invasion or the occupation will be a mess. The marchers could be right. And he acknowledges the accidental nature of opinions; if he hadn't met and admired the Professor, he might have thought differently, less ambivalently, about the coming war. Opinions are a roll of the dice; by definition, none of the people now milling around the Warren Street tube station happen to have been tortured by the regime, or know and love anyone who has, or even know much about the place at all. It's likely most of them barely registered the massacres in Kurdish Iraq, or in the Shiite south, and now they find they care with a passion for Iraqi lives. They have good reasons for their views, among which are concerns for their own safety. Al Qaeda, it's said, which loathes both godless Saddam and the Shiite opposition, will be provoked by an attack on Iraq into revenge on the soft cities of the West. Self-interest is a decent enough cause, but Perowne can't feel, as the marchers themselves probably can, that they have an exclusive hold on moral discernment.



"This is not the Puss in Boots I knew and loved as a child."

He walks down a faint incline of greasy cobbles to where the owners of houses like his once kept their horses. Now those who can afford it cosset their cars here with off-street parking. Attached to his key ring is an infrared device that he presses to raise a clattering steel shutter. It's revealed in mechanical jerks, the long nose and shining eyes at the stable door, chafing to be free. A silver Mercedes S500 with cream upholstery—and he's no longer embarrassed by it. He doesn't even love it—it's simply a sensual part of what he regards as his overgenerous share of the world's goods. If he didn't own it, he tries to tell himself, someone else would. He hasn't driven it in a week, but in the gloom of the dry dustless garage the machine breathes an animal warmth of its own. He opens the door and sits in. He likes driving it wearing his threadbare sports clothes. On the front passenger seat is an old copy of the *Journal of Neurosurgery*, which carries a report of his on a convention in Rome. He tosses his squash racquet on top of it. It's his son, Theo, who disapproves most, calling it a doctor's car, as if this were the final word in condemnation. Daisy, on the other hand, said she thought that Harold Pinter owned something like it, which made it all fine with her. Rosalind encouraged him to buy it. She thinks his life is too guiltily austere, and never buying clothes or good wine or a single painting is a touch pretentious. Still living like a graduate student. It was time for him to branch out.

For months, he drove it apologetically, rarely in fourth gear, reluctant to overtake, waving on right-turning traffic, punctilious in permitting cheaper cars their road space. He was cured at last by a fishing trip to northwest Scotland with Jay Strauss. Seduced by the open road and Jay's exultant celebration of "Lutheran genius," Henry finally accepted himself as the owner, the master of his vehicle. In fact, he's always quietly considered himself a good driver: as in the operating theatre, firm, precise, defensive to the correct degree. He and Jay fished the streams and lochans around Torridon for brown trout. One wet afternoon, glancing over his shoulder while casting, Henry saw his car a hundred yards away, parked at an angle on a rise of the track, picked out in soft light against a backdrop of birch, flowering heather, and thunderous black sky—the realization of an adman's vision—and felt for the first time a gentle, swooning joy of possession. It is, of course, possible, permissible, to love an inanimate object. But this moment was the peak of the affair; since then his feelings have settled into mild, occasional pleasure. The car gives him vague satisfaction when he's driving it; the rest of the time it rarely crosses his mind. As its makers intended and promised, it's become part of him.



But certain small things still stir him particularly, like the way the car idles without vibration; the rev counter alone confirms that the engine is turning. He switches on the radio, which is playing sustained, respectful applause as he eases out of the garage, and lets the steel shutter drop behind him, and goes slowly up the mews and turns left, back onto Warren Street. His squash club is on Huntley Street, in a converted nurses' home—no distance at all, but he's driving because he has errands to do afterward. Shamelessly, he always enjoys the city from inside his car, where the air is filtered and hi-fi music confers pathos on the humblest details—a Schubert string trio is dignifying the narrow street he's slipping down now. He's heading a couple of blocks south in order to loop eastward across the Tottenham Court Road. Cleveland Street used to be known for garment sweatshops and prostitutes. Now it has Greek, Turkish, and Italian restaurants—the local sort that never get mentioned in the guides—with terraces where people eat out in summer. There's a man who repairs old computers, a fabric shop, a cobbler's, and, farther down, a wig emporium, much visited by transvestites. This is the fair embodiment of an inner-city byway—diverse, self-confident, obscure. Whenever he suffers a bout of insomnia, he easily persuades himself that the world has changed beyond recall, that harmless streets like this and the tolerant life they embody can be destroyed by the new enemy—well organized, tentacular, full of hatred and focussed zeal. How foolishly apocalyptic those apprehensions seem by daylight, when the self-evident fact of the streets and the people on them is its own justification, its own insurance. The world has not fundamentally changed. All this talk of a "hundred-year crisis" is mere indulgence. There are always crises, and Islamic terrorism will settle into place, alongside recent wars, climate change, the politics of international trade, shortages of land and fresh water, hunger, poverty, and the rest.

He listens to the Schubert sweetly fade and swell. The street is fine, and the city, grand achievement of the living and all the dead who've ever lived here, is fine, too, and robust. It won't easily allow itself to be destroyed. It's too good to let go. As he approaches the Tottenham Court Road, he sees a motorbike policeman in a yellow jacket, with his machine on its stand, holding out an arm to stop him. Of course, the road is closed for the march. He should have known. But still Perowne keeps coming, slowing all the while, as if, by pretending not to know, he could be exempted—after all, he only wants to cross this road, not drive down it. Or, at least, he'll receive his due: a little drama of exchange between a firm but apologetic policeman and the solemnly tolerant citizen.

And, indeed, the cop is coming toward him, with a glance up the street at the marchers and a pursed, tolerant smile that suggests that he himself would have bombed Iraq long ago, and many other countries besides. Perowne, relaxed at the wheel, would have responded with a collegiate closed-mouth smile of his own, but two things happen, almost at the same time. Behind the patrolman, on the far side of the road, three men—two tall, in tracksuits, one thickset and short and wearing a black suit—are hurrying out of a lap-dancing club, the Spearmint Rhino, almost stumbling in their efforts not to run. When they turn the corner, onto the street Perowne wants to enter, they're no longer so restrained. With the shorter man lagging behind, they run toward a car parked on the near side.

The second thing to happen is that the cop, meanwhile, unaware of the men, suddenly stops on his way to Perowne and raises a hand to his left ear. He nods and speaks into a microphone fixed in front of his mouth and turns toward his bike. Then, remembering what he was about, he glances back. Perowne meets his eye and, with a self-deprecating, interrogative look, points across the road at University Street. The cop shrugs, and then nods and makes a gesture with his hand to say, "Do it quickly, then." What the hell. The marchers are still mostly up at the other end, and he's received fresh orders.

Perowne isn't late for his game, nor is he impatient to be across the road. He likes his car, but he's never been interested in the details of its performance, its acceleration from a standing start. He assumes it's impressive, but he's never put it to the test. He's far too old to be leaving rubber at traffic lights. As he slips into first, he looks diligently in both directions, even though it's a one-way flow northward; he knows that pedestrians could be coming from either direction. If he moves briskly across the four-lane width of the road, it's out of consideration for the policeman, who's already starting up his bike. Perowne doesn't want the man in trouble with his superiors. And that hand gesture communicated the need to be quick. By the time the Mercedes has travelled the sixty or seventy feet to the entrance of University Street, where he shifts into second, he may be doing twenty miles an hour. Twenty-five, perhaps. Thirty at a stretch. And even as he shifts up he's easing off, looking out for the right turn before Gower Street, which is also closed off.

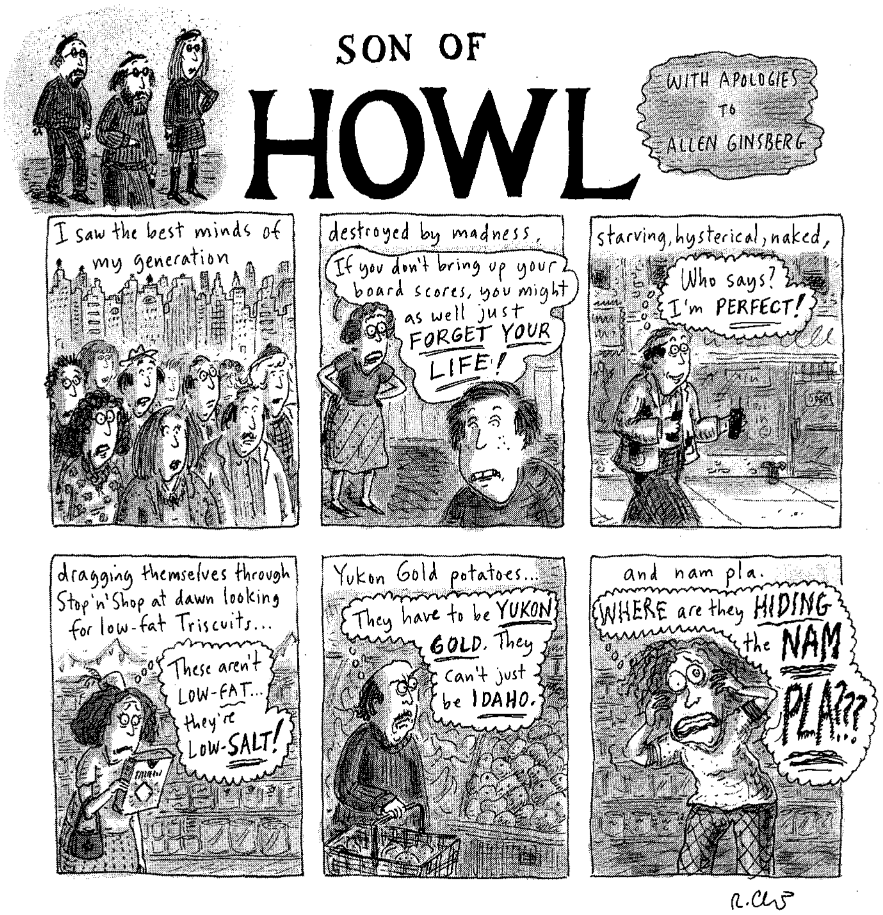
And the forward motion is a prompt: it instantly returns him to his thoughts. A second can be a long time in introspection. Long enough for Henry to think, or sense, without unwrapping the thought into syntax and words, that he was wrong: the marchers are there to remind him—the world probably has changed fundamentally, and the matter is being clumsily handled, particularly by the Americans. There are people around the planet, well connected and organized, who would like to kill him and his family and friends, just to make a point. The scale of death contemplated is no longer at issue; there'll be more deaths on a similar scale, probably in this city. Is he so frightened that he can't face the fact? The assertions and the questions don't spell themselves out. He experiences them more as a mental shrug followed by an interrogative pulse. This is the preverbal language that linguists called mentalese. Hardly a language, more a matrix of shifting patterns, consolidating and compressing meaning in fractions of a second, and blending it inseparably with its distinctive emotional hue, which itself is rather like a color. A sickly yellow. Even with a poet's gift of compression, it could take hundreds of words and many minutes to describe. So that when a flash of red streaks in across his left peripheral vision, like a shape on his retina in a bout of insomnia, it already has the quality of an idea, a new idea, unexpected and dangerous but entirely his, and not of the world beyond himself.

He's driving with unconscious expertise into the narrow column of space framed on the right by a curb-flanked cycle path and on the left by a line of parked cars. It's from this line that the thought springs, and, with it, the snap of a wing mirror cleanly sheared and the whine of sheet-steel surfaces sliding under pressure as two cars pour into a gap wide enough for one. Perowne's instant decision at the moment of impact is to accelerate as he swerves right. There are other sounds—the staccato rattle of the red car on his left side raking a half-dozen stationary vehicles and the thwack of concrete against rubber, like an amplified single handclap, as the Mercedes mounts the cycle-path curb. His back wheel hits the curb, too. Then he's ahead of the intruder and braking. The slewed cars stop thirty yards apart, engines cut, and for a moment there's silence, and no one gets out.

By the standards of contemporary traffic accidents—Henry has done a total of five years in Accident and Emergency—this is a trivial matter. No one can possibly be hurt, and he won't be in the role of doctor at the scene. He's done it twice in the past five years, both for heart attacks, once on a flight to New York, another time in an airless London theatre during a June heat wave, both occasions unsatisfactory and complicated. He's not in shock, he's not weirdly calm or elated or numbed, his vision isn't unusually sharp, he isn't trembling. He listens to the click of hot metal contracting. What he feels is rising irritation struggling against worldly caution. He doesn't have to look—one side of his car is wrecked. He already sees ahead into the weeks, the months of paperwork, insurance claims and counterclaims, phone calls, delays at the garage. Something original and pristine has been stolen from his car and can never be restored, however good the repair. There's also the impact on the front axle, on the bearings, on those mysterious parts which conjure the essence of prolonged torture—*rack and pinion*. His car will never be the same again. It's ruinously altered, and so is his Saturday. He'll never make his game.

Above all, there swells in him a peculiarly modern emotion—the motorist's rectitude, spot-welding a passion for justice to the thrill of hatred, in the service of which various worn phrases tumble through his thoughts, revitalized, cleansed of cliché: just pulled out, no signal, stupid bastard, didn't even look, what's his mirror for, fucking *bastard*. The only person in the world he hates is sitting in the car behind, and Henry is going to have to talk to him, confront him, exchange insurance details with him—all this when he could be playing squash. He feels he's been left behind. And he seems to see it: receding obliviously down a side street is the other, most likely version of himself, like a vanishing rich uncle, introspective and happy, motoring carefree through his Saturday, leaving him alone and wretched, in his new, improbable, inescapable fate. This is real. Telling himself it is so betrays how little he believes it yet. He picks his racquet off the car floor and puts it back on top of the *Journal*. His right hand is on the door catch. But he doesn't move yet. He's looking in the mirror. There are reasons to be cautious.

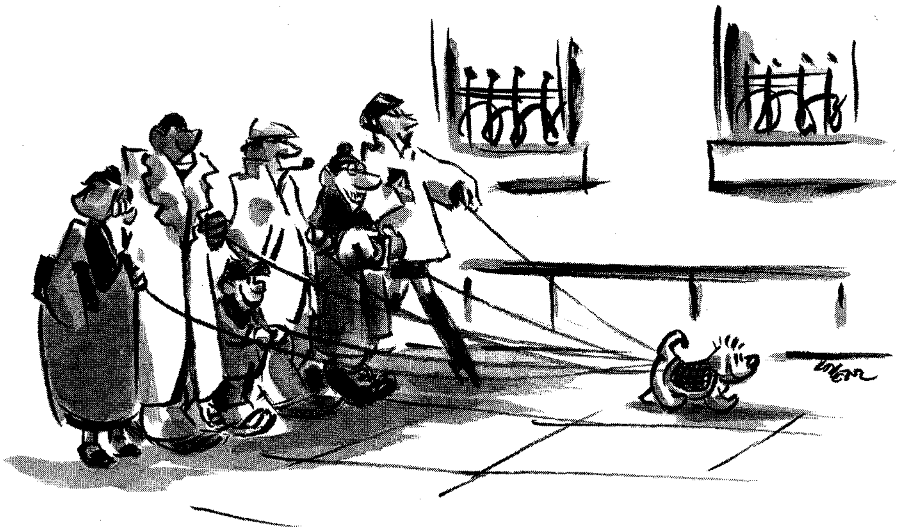
There are, as he expected, three heads in the car behind. He knows he's subject


SON OF
HOWL
WITH APOLOGIES TO ALLEN GINSBERG
I saw the best minds of my generation
destroyed by madness,
If you don't bring up your board scores, you might as well just FORGET YOUR LIFE!
starving, hysterical, naked,
Who says? I'm PERFECT!
dragging themselves through Stop'n'Shop at dawn looking for low-fat Triscuits...
These aren't LOW-FAT... they're LOW-SALT!
Yukon Gold potatoes...
They have to be YUKON GOLD. They can't just be IDAHO.
and nam pla.
WHERE are they HIDING the NAM PLA???
R. Chast

to unexamined assumptions, and he tries to examine them now. As far as he's aware, lap dancing is a lawful pursuit. But if he'd seen the three men hurrying, even furtively, from the Wellcome Trust or the British Library he might already have stepped from his car. That they were running makes it possible they'll be even more irritated than he is by the delay. The car is a 5 Series BMW, a vehicle he associates for no good reason with criminality, drug dealing. And there are three men, not one. The shortest is in the front passenger seat, and the door on that side is opening as he watches, followed immediately by the driver's, and then the rear off-side door. Perowne, who does not intend to be trapped into talking from a sitting position, gets out of his car. The half minute's pause has given the situation a gamelike quality in which calculations have already been made. The three men have their own reasons for holding back and discussing their next move. It's important, Perowne thinks as he goes around to the front of his car, to remember that he's in the right and that he's angry. He also has to be careful. But these contradictory notions aren't helpful, and he decides he'll be better off feeling his way into the confrontation, rather than troubling himself with ground rules. His impulse then is to ignore the men, walk away from them, around the front of the Mercedes, to get a view of the damaged side. But even as he stands, with hands on hips, in a pose of proprietorial outrage, he keeps the men, now advancing as a group, on the edge of his vision.

At a glance, there seems to be no damage at all. The wing mirror is intact, there are no dents in the panels; amazingly, the metallic-silver paint is clean. He leans forward to catch the light at a different angle. With fingers splayed, he runs a hand lightly over the body, as if he really knows what he's about. There is nothing. Not a blemish. In immediate, tactical terms, this seems to leave him at a disadvantage. He has nothing to show for his anger. If there's any damage at all, it is out of sight, between the front wheels.

The men have stopped to look at something in the road. The short fellow in the black suit touches with the tip of his shoe the BMW's shorn-off wing mirror, turning it over the way one might a dead animal. One of the others, a tall young man with the long mournful face of a horse, picks it up, cradling it in both hands. They stare down at it together and then, at a remark from the short man, they turn their faces toward Perowne simultaneously, with abrupt curiosity, like deer disturbed in a forest. For the first time, it occurs to him that he might be in some kind of danger. Officially closed off at both ends, the street is completely deserted. Behind the men, on the Tottenham Court Road, a broken file of protesters is making its way south to join the main body. Perowne glances over his shoulder. There, behind him on Gower Street, the march proper has begun. Thousands packed in a single dense column are making for Parliament Square, their banners angled forward heroically, as in a revolutionary poster. From their faces, hands, and clothes they emanate the rich color, almost like warmth, peculiar to compacted humanity. For dramatic effect, they're walking in silence to the funereal beat of marching drums.



The three men resume their approach. As before, the short man—five feet five or six, perhaps—is out in front. His gait is distinctive, with a little jazzy twist and dip of his trunk, as though he were punting along a gentle stretch of river. The punter from the Spearmint Rhino. Perhaps he's listening to his headphones. Some people go nowhere, even into disputes, without a soundtrack. The other two have the manner of subordinates, sidekicks. They're wearing trainers, tracksuits, and hooded sweatshirts—the currency of the street, so general as to be no style at all. Theo sometimes dresses this way, in order, so he says, not to make decisions about how he looks. The horse-faced fellow is still holding the wing mirror in both hands, presumably to make a point. The unrelenting throb of drums is not helpful to the situation, and the fact that so many people are close by, unaware of him, makes Henry feel all the more isolated. It's best to go on looking busy. He drops down closer to the car, noting a squashed Coke can under his front tire. There is, he sees now, with both relief and irritation, an irregular patch on the rear door where the sheen is diminished, as though rubbed with a fine emery cloth. Surely the contact point, confined to a two-foot patch. How right he was, swerving away before he hit the brake. He feels steadier now, straightening up to face the men as they stop in front of him.

Unlike some of his colleagues—the surgical psychopaths—Henry doesn't actually relish personal confrontation. He isn't the machete-wielding type. But clinical experience is, among all else, an abrasive, toughening process, bound to wear away at one's sensitivities. Patients, juniors, the recently bereaved, management, of course—inevitably, in two decades, the moments have come around when he's been required to fight his corner, or explain, or placate in the face of a furious emotional upsurge. There's usually a lot at stake: for colleagues, questions of hierarchy and professional pride or wasted hospital resources, for patients a loss of function, for their relatives a suddenly dead spouse or child—weight-

OLD SOLDIER

By the time I was ten,
I had fought in hundreds of battles,
Had innumerable wounds,
Had slain thousands.

My mother took me by the hand
And led me into the garden.
The cherry trees were in flower.
There was a cat lying in the grass
Whose tail I wanted to pull,
But I let her be for a moment.

After the air raid, the sky was full
Of birds and flying cinders
But the ants at our feet
Were their usual serene selves,
Running their quick errands
Along the crumbling walls.

I forgot to mention my sword.
True, it was of cardboard,
But its handle was painted gold.
What I needed was a horse—
The one I saw pull a hearse
With a merry wave of his tail.

—*Charles Simic*

ier affairs than a scratched car. Especially when they involve patients, these moments have a purity and innocence about them; everything is stripped down to the essentials of being—memory, vision, the ability to recognize faces, chronic pain, motor function, even a sense of self. What lies in the background, glowing faintly, are the issues of medical science, the wonders it performs, the faith it inspires, and, against that, its slowly diminishing but still vast ignorance of the brain, and the mind, and the relation between the two. Regularly penetrating the skull with some modest success is a relatively recent adventure. There's bound to be disappointment sometimes, and when it comes, the showdown with the relatives in his office, no one needs to calculate how to behave or what to say, no one feels watched. It pours out.

Among Perowne's acquaintance are those medics who deal not with the brain but only with the mind, with the diseases of consciousness; these colleagues embrace a tradition, a set of prejudices only rarely voiced nowadays, that the neurosurgeons are blundering arrogant fools with blunt instruments, bonesetters let loose upon the most complex object in the known universe. When an operation fails, the patient or the relatives tend to come around to this view. But too late. What is said then is tragic and sincere. However appalling these heartfelt engagements, however much he knows himself to be maligned by a patient's poor or self-serving recollection of how the risks were outlined, whatever his certainty that he's performed in the theatre as well as current knowledge and techniques allow, Perowne comes away not only chastened—he has manifestly failed to lower expectations—but obscurely purified: he's had a fundamental human exchange, as elemental in its way as love.

But here on University Street it's impossible not to feel that playacting is about to begin. Dressed like a scarecrow, in mangy fleece, his sweater with its row of holes, his paint-stained trousers supported by a knotted cord, he stands by his powerful machine. He is cast in a role, and there's no way out. This, as people like to say, is urban drama. A century of movies and half a century of television have rendered the matter insincere. It is pure artifice. Here are the cars, and here are the owners. Here are the guys, the strangers, whose self-respect is on the line. Someone is going to have to impose his will and win, and the other is going to give way. Popular culture has worn this matter smooth with reiteration, this ancient genetic patrimony that also oils the machinations of bullfrogs and cockerels and stags. And, despite the varied and casual dress code, there are rules as elaborate as the politesse of the Versailles court which no set of genes can express. For a start, it is not permitted as they stand there to acknowledge the self-consciousness of the event, or its overbearing irony: from just up the street, they can hear the tramping and tribal drums of the peacemongers. Furthermore, nothing can be predicted, but everything, as soon as it happens, will seem to fit.

"Cigarette?"

Exactly so. This is how it's bound to start.

In an old-fashioned gesture, the other driver offers the pack with a snap of the wrist, arranging the unfiltered cigarettes like organ pipes. The gripped hand extending toward Perowne is large, given the man's height, and papery pale, with black hair coiled on the back and extending to the distal interphalangeal joints. The persistent tremor also draws Perowne's professional attention. Perhaps there's reassurance to be had in the unsteadiness of the grip.

"I won't, thanks."

He lights one for himself and blows the smoke past Henry, who's already one point down—not man enough to smoke, or, more essentially, to offer gifts. It's important not to be passive. It has to be his move. He puts out his own hand.

"Henry Perowne."

"Baxter."

"Mr. Baxter?"

"Baxter."

Baxter's hand is large, Henry's fractionally larger, but neither man attempts a show of strength. Their handshake is light and brief. Baxter is one of those smokers whose pores exude a perfume, perwork, can already sense the prolonged trauma of it. Far better to be one of many victims than the original sinner.

He says, "I am indeed sorry that you pulled out without looking."

He surprises himself. This fussy, faintly archaic "indeed" is not generally part of his lexicon. Deploying it entails decisions; he isn't going to pretend to the language of the street. He's standing on professional dignity.

Baxter lays his left hand on his right, as though to calm it. He says patiently, "I didn't need to be looking, did I? The Tottenham Court Road's closed. You weren't supposed to be there."

Perowne says, "The rules of the road aren't suspended. Anyway, a policeman waved me across."

"Police man?" Baxter's dividing and leaning on the construction makes it sound childish. He turns to his friends. "You seen a police man?" And then back to Perowne, with mocking politeness: "This is Nark, and this is Nigel."

Until now, the two have stood off to one side, just behind Baxter, listening without expression. Nigel is the horse-faced man. His companion may be a police informer, or addicted to narcotics, or, given his comatose look, presenting with narcolepsy.

"No policemen round here," Nigel explains. "They all busy with the marching scum."

Perowne pretends to ignore both men. His business is with Baxter. "This is the moment we swap insurance details." All three chuckle at this, but he continues: "If we can't agree on what happened, we'll phone the police." He looks at his watch. Jay Strauss will be on court, warming up the ball. It's not too late to settle the matter and get on his way. Baxter hasn't reacted to the mention of a phone call. Instead, he takes the wing mirror from Nigel and displays it to Perowne. The spiderweb fissures in the glass show the sky in a mosaic of white and ragged blue which shimmers with the agitation in Baxter's hand. His tone is genial.

"Fortunately for you, I got a mate does bodywork, on the cheap. But he does a nice job. Seven-fifty I reckon he'd sort me out."

Nark rouses himself. "There's a cash point on the corner."

And Nigel, as though pleasantly sur-

"You're five now, Lance. You've got to let go of four."

• •

an oily essence of his habit. Garlic affects certain people the same way. Possibly the kidneys are implicated. He's a fidgety, small-faced young man with thick eyebrows and dark-brown hair razored close to the skull. The mouth is set bulbously, with the smoothly shaved shadow of a strong beard adding to the effect of a muzzle. The general simian air is compounded by sloping shoulders, and the built-up trapezoids suggest time in the gym, compensating for his height, perhaps. The sixties-style suit—tight cut, high lapels, flat-fronted trousers worn from the hip—is taking some strain around the jacket's single fastened button. There's also tightness in the fabric around the biceps. He half turns and dips away from Perowne, then bobs back. He gives an impression of fretful impatience, of destructive energy waiting to be released. He may be about to lash out. Perowne is familiar with some of the current literature on violence. It's not always a pathology; self-interested social organisms find it rational to be violent sometimes. Among the game theorists and radical criminologists, the stock of Thomas Hobbes keeps on rising. Holding the unruly, the thugs, in check is the famous "common power" to keep all men in awe—a governing body, an arm of the state, freely granted a monopoly on the legitimate use of violence. But drug dealers and pimps, among others who live beyond the law, are not inclined to dial 999 for Leviathan; they settle their quarrels in their own way.

Perowne, almost a foot taller than Baxter, considers that if it comes to a scrap he'll be wise to protect his testicles. But it's a ridiculous thought; he hasn't been in a hand-to-hand fight since he was eight. Three against one. He simply won't let it happen.

Baxter says as soon as they've shaken hands, "I expect you're all ready to tell me how sincerely sorry you are." He looks back, past the Mercedes, to his own car where it's parked at a diagonal across the road. Behind it is an irregular line scraped along the sides of half a dozen parked cars by the BMW's door handle. The appearance on the street now of just one outraged owner will be enough to set off a cascade of insurance claims. Henry, knowing a good deal about paprised by the idea, says, "Yeah. We could walk down there with you."

These two have shifted their position so they're almost, but not quite, flanking Henry. Baxter, meanwhile, steps back. The maneuverings are clumsily deliberate, like an ill-rehearsed children's ballet. Perowne's attention, his professional regard, settles once again on Baxter's right hand. It isn't simply a tremor; it's a fidgety restlessness implicating practically every muscle. Speculating about it soothes him, even as he feels the shoulders of both men pressing lightly through his fleece. Perversely, he no longer believes himself to be in any great danger. It's hard to take the trio seriously; the cash idea has a boyish, make-believe quality. Everything said seems like a quotation from something they've all seen a dozen times before and half forgotten.

At the sound of a trumpet expertly played, the four men turn to watch the march. It's a series of intricate staccato runs that end on a high tapering note. It might be a passage from a Bach cantata, because Henry immediately imagines a soprano and a sweetly melancholic air, and, in the background, a supportive cello squarely sawing away. On Gower Street, the concept of a reproachful funereal march no longer holds. It was difficult to sustain with thousands in a column stretching over hundreds of yards. Now the chants and clapping rise and fall in volume as different sections of the crowd move past the junction with University Street. Baxter's fixed regard is on it as it passes, his features faintly distorted, strained by pity. A textbook phrase comes to Henry in much the same way as the cantata melody—a modest rise in his adrenaline level is making him unusually associative. Or the pressures of the past week won't release him from the habits, the intellectual game of diagnosis. The phrase is "a false sense of superiority." Yes, it can be put down to a slight alteration in character, preceding the first tremors, somewhat short of, a little less disabling than, those other neurological conditions—grandiosity, delusions of grandeur. But he may be misremembering. Neurology is not his field. As Baxter stares at the marchers, he makes tiny movements with his head, little nods and shakes. Watching him unobserved for a few seconds, Perowne suddenly understands: Baxter is unable to initiate or make saccades—those flickering changes of eye position from one fixation to another. To scan the crowd, he is having to move his head.

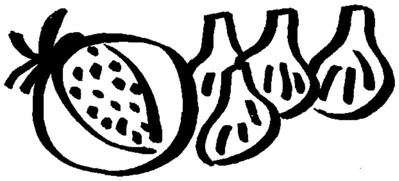
As though in confirmation, he turns his whole body toward Perowne and says genially, "Horrible rabble. Sponging off the country they hate."

Perowne thinks he understands enough about Baxter to know he should get clear. Shrugging off Nigel and Nark at his side, he turns toward his car. "I'm not giving you cash," he says dismissively. "I'm giving you my details. If you don't want to give me yours, that's fine. Your registration number will do. I'll be on my way." He then adds, barely truthfully, "I'm late for an important meeting."

But most of this sentence is obliterated by a single sound, a shout of rage.

Even as he turns back toward Baxter in surprise, and even as he sees, or senses, what's coming toward him at such speed, there remains in a portion of his thoughts a droning, pedestrian diagnostician who notes poor self-control, emotional lability, explosive temper, suggestive of reduced levels of GABA and excessive glutamate among the appropriate binding sites on striatal neurons. There is much in human affairs that can be accounted for at the level of the complex molecule. Who could ever reckon up the damage done to love and friendship and all hopes of happiness by a surfeit or depletion of this or that neurotransmitter? And who will ever find a morality, an ethics down among the enzymes and amino acids, when the general taste is for looking in the other direction?

Despite Baxter's impaired ocular fixation, and his chorea, those quick, jerky movements, the blow that's aimed at Perowne's heart and that he dodges only fractionally lands on his sternum with colossal force, so that it seems to him, and perhaps it really is the case, that there surges throughout his body a sharp ridge, a shock wave, of high blood pressure, a concussive thrill that carries with it not so much pain as an electric jolt of stupefaction and a brief deathly chill that has a visual component of blinding, snowy whiteness.



"All right," he hears Baxter say, which is an instruction to his companions.

They grab Henry by his elbows and forearms, and as his vision clears he sees that he's being propelled through a gap between two parked cars. Together, they cross the pavement at speed. They turn him and slam his back against a chain-locked double door in a recess. He sees on the wall to his left a polished brass plaque that says "Fire Exit, Spearmint Rhino." Just up the street is a pub, the Jeremy Bentham. But, if it's open this early, the drinkers are all inside in the warmth. Perowne has two immediate priorities whose importance holds as his full consciousness returns. The first is to keep the promise to himself not to fight back. The punch has already told him how much expertise he lacks. The second is to stay on his feet. He's seen a fair number of brain injuries among those unlucky enough to fall to the ground before their attackers. The foot, like some roughneck hick town, is a remote province of the brain, liberated by distance from responsibility. A kick is less intimate, less involving, than a punch, and one kick never quite seems enough. Back in the epic days of organized football violence when he was a registrar, he learned a good deal about subdural hematomas from steel-tipped Doc Martens.

He stands facing them in a little whitewashed brick cave of a recess, well out of sight of the march. The structure amplifies the rasp of their breathing. Nigel takes a fistful of Perowne's fleece and with the other hand seeks out the bulge of his wallet, which is in an inside zipped pocket.

"Nah," Baxter says. "We don't want his money."

By this Perowne understands that honor is to be satisfied by a thorough beating. As with the insurance claims, he sees the dreary future ahead. Weeks of painful convalescence. Perhaps that's optimistic. Baxter's gaze is on him, a gaze that can't be shifted unless he moves the whole of his heavy shaven head. His face is alive with small tremors that never quite form into an expression. It is a muscular restlessness that will one day—this is Perowne's considered opinion—become athetoid, plagued by involuntary, uncontrollable movements.

There's a sense among the trio of a pause for breath, a steadying before the business. Nark is already bunching his right fist. Perowne notes three rings on the index, middle, and ring fingers, bands of gold as broad as sawn-off plumbing. He has, he reckons, a few seconds left. Baxter is in his mid-twenties. This isn't the moment to be asking for a family history. If a parent has it, you have a fifty-fifty chance of going down, too. Chromosome 4. The misfortune lies within a single gene, in an excessive repeat of a single sequence—CAG. Here's biological determinism in its purest form. More than forty repeats of that one little codon and you're doomed. Your future is fixed and easily foretold. The longer the repeat, the earlier the onset. Between ten and twenty years to complete the course, from the first small alterations of character, twitches in the hands and face, emotional disturbance, including—most notably—sudden, uncontrollable alterations of mood, to the helpless jerky dance-like movements, intellectual dilapidation, memory failure, agnosia, apraxia, dementia, total loss of muscular control, rigidity sometimes, nightmarish hallucinations, and a meaningless end. This is how the brilliant machinery of being is undone by the tiniest of faulty cogs, the insidious whisper of ruin, a single bad idea lodged in every cell, on every chromosome 4.

Nark is drawing back his right arm to strike. Nigel seems content to let him go first. Henry has heard that early onset tends to indict the paternal gene. But that may not be right. There's nothing to lose by making a guess. He speaks into the blaze of Baxter's regard.

"Your father had it. Now you've got it, too."

He has the impression of himself as a witch doctor delivering a curse. Baxter's expression is hard to judge. He makes a vague, febrile movement with his left hand to restrain his companions. There's silence as he swallows and strains forward, frowning, as if about to clear an obstruction from his throat. Perowne has expressed himself ambiguously. His "had" could easily have been taken for a "has." And Baxter's father, alive or dead, might not even be known to his son. But Perowne is counting on Baxter's knowing about his condition. If he does, he won't have told Nigel or Nark or any of his friends. This is his secret shame. He may be in denial, knowing and not knowing, knowing and preferring not to think about it.

When Baxter speaks at last, his voice is different, cautious perhaps. "You knew my father."

"I'm a doctor."

"Like fuck you are, dressed like that."

"I'm a doctor. Has someone explained to you what's going to happen? Do you want me to tell you what I think your problem might be?"

It works, the shameless blackmail works. Baxter flares suddenly. "What problem?" And before Perowne can reply he adds ferociously, "And you'll shut the fuck up." Then, as quickly, he subsides and turns away. They are together, he and Perowne, in a world not of the medical but of the magical. When you're diseased, it is unwise to abuse the shaman.

Nigel says, "What's going on? What did your dad have?"

"Shut up."

The moment of the thrashing is passing and Perowne senses the power passing to him. This fire-escape recess is his consulting room. Its mean volume reflects back to him a voice regaining the full timbre of its authority. He says, "Are you seeing someone about it?"

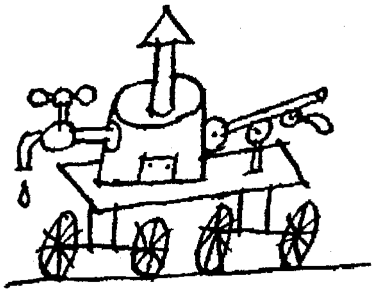
"What's he on about, Baxter?"

Baxter shoves the broken wing mirror into Nark's hands. "Go and wait in the car."

"You're kidding."

"I mean it. Both of you. Go and wait in the fucking car."

It is pitifully evident, Baxter's desperation to separate his friends from the sharer of his secret. The two young men exchange a look and shrug. Then, without a glance at Perowne, they set off back up the road. Hard to imagine they don't think something is wrong with Baxter. But these are the early stages of the disease, and its advance is slow. They might not have known him long. And a jazzy walk, an interesting tremor, the occasional lordly flash of temper or mood swing might in their milieu mark out a man of character. When they reach the BMW, Nark opens a rear door and tosses the wing mirror in. Side by side, they lean on the front of the car, arms folded, like movie hoods, watching Baxter and Perowne.



Perowne persists gently. "When did your father die?"

"Leave it."

Baxter is not looking at him. He stands fidgeting with shoulder turned, like a sulky child waiting to be coaxed, unable to make the first move. Here is the signature of so many neurodegenerative diseases—the swift transition from one mood to another, without awareness or memory, or understanding of how it seems to others.

"Is your mother still alive?"

"Not as far as I'm concerned."

"Are you married?"

"No."

"Is your real name Baxter?"

"That's my business."

"All right. Where are you from?"

"I grew up in Folkestone."

"And where do you live now?"

"My dad's old flat. Kentish Town."

"Any occupation, training, college?"

"I didn't get on with school. What's that to do with you?"

"And what's your doctor said about your condition?"

Baxter shrugs. But he's accepted Perowne's right to interrogate. They've slipped into their roles, and Perowne keeps going.

"Has anyone mentioned Huntington's disease to you?"

A feeble dry rattling sound, like that of stones shaken in a tin, reaches them from the march. Baxter is looking at the ground. Perowne takes his silence as confirmation.

"Do you want to tell me who your doctor is?"

"Why would I do that?"

"We could get you referred to a colleague of mine. He's good. He could make things easier for you."

At this, Baxter turns and angles his head in his attempt to settle the taller man's image on his fovea, that small depression on the retina where vision is most acute. There's nothing anyone can do about a damaged saccadic system. And, generally, there's nothing on offer at all for this condition, beyond managing the descent. But Henry sees now in Baxter's agitated features a sudden avidity, a hunger for information, or hope. Or simply a need to talk.

"What sort of thing?"

"Exercises. Certain drugs."

"Exercise . . ." He snorts on the word. He is right to pick up on the fatuity, the feebleness of the idea. Perowne presses on.

"What has your doctor told you?"

"He said there's nothing, didn't he."

He says this as a challenge, or a calling in of a debt; Perowne's been reprieved, and in return he has to come up with a reason for optimism, if not a cure. Baxter wants his doctor proved wrong.

But Perowne says, "I think he's right. There was some work with stem-cell implantation in the late nineties, but . . ."

"It was shit."

"Yes, it was disappointing. Best hope now, apparently, is RNA interference."

"Yeah. Gene silencing. One day, perhaps. After I'm dead."

"You're well up on this, then."

"Oh, thank *you*, Doctor. But what's this about certain drugs?"

Perowne is familiar with this impulse in patients, this pursuit of the slenderest leads. If there's a drug, Baxter or his doctor will know about it. But it's necessary for Baxter to check. And check again. Someone might know something he doesn't. A week passes and there could be a new development. And when the line runs out in this field the charlatans lie in wait for the fearful, offering the apricot-stone diet, the aura massage, the power of prayer. Over Baxter's shoulder Perowne can see Nigel and Nark. They're no longer leaning against the car but walking up and down in front of it, talking animatedly, gesturing up the road.

Perowne says, "I'm talking about pain relief, help with loss of balance, tremors, depression."

Baxter moves his head from side to side. The muscles in his cheeks are independently alive. Henry senses an approaching shift of mood. "Oh, fuck," Baxter keeps murmuring to himself. "Oh, fuck." In this transitional phase of perplexity or sorrow, the vaguely apelike features are softened, even attractive. He's an intelligent man, and gives the impression that, illness apart, he's missed his chances, made some big mistakes and ended up in the wrong company. Probably dropped out of school long ago and regrets it. No parents around. And now, what worse situation than this could he find himself in? There's no way out for him. No one can help. But Perowne knows himself to be incapable of pity. Clinical experience wrung that from him long ago. And a part of him never ceases to calculate how soon he can safely end this encounter. Besides, the matter is beyond pity. There are so many ways a brain can let you down. Like an expensive car, it's intricate, but mass-produced nevertheless, with more than six billion in circulation.

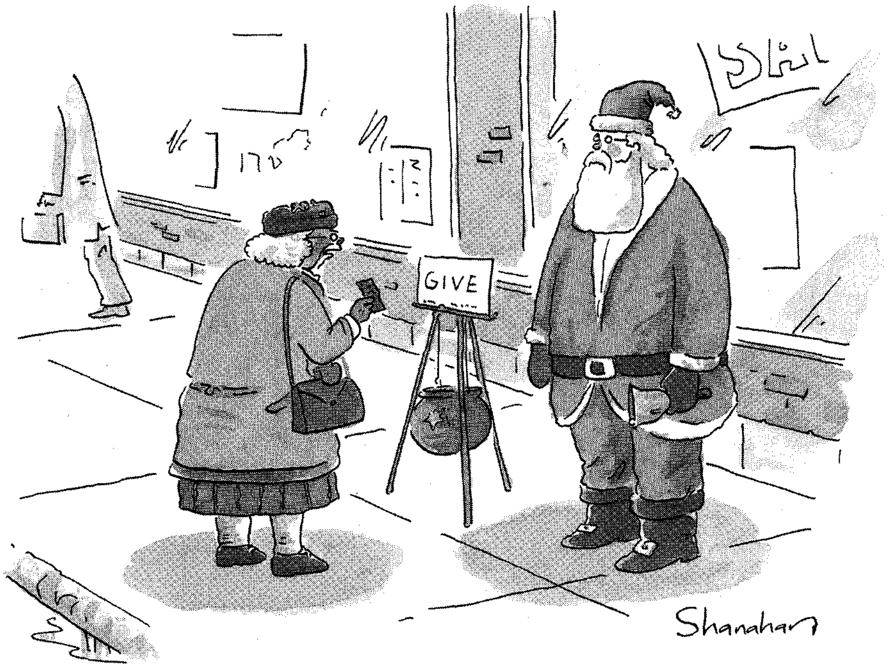
Rightly, Baxter believes he's been cheated of a little violence and the exercise of a little power, and the more he considers it the angrier he becomes. Another rapid change in mental weather, a new mood front is approaching, and it's turbulent. He ceases his murmuring and moves in close enough for Perowne to smell a metallic flavor on his breath.

"You streak of piss," Baxter says quickly as he pushes him in the chest. "You're trying to fuck with me. In front of those two. You think I care? Well, fuck you. I'm calling them back."

From his position, with his back to the fire exit, Perowne can already see that a bad moment awaits Baxter. He turns away from Perowne and steps out into the center of the pavement in time to see Nigel and Nark walking away from the BMW, back toward the Tottenham Court Road.

Baxter makes a short run in their direction and shouts, "Oi!"

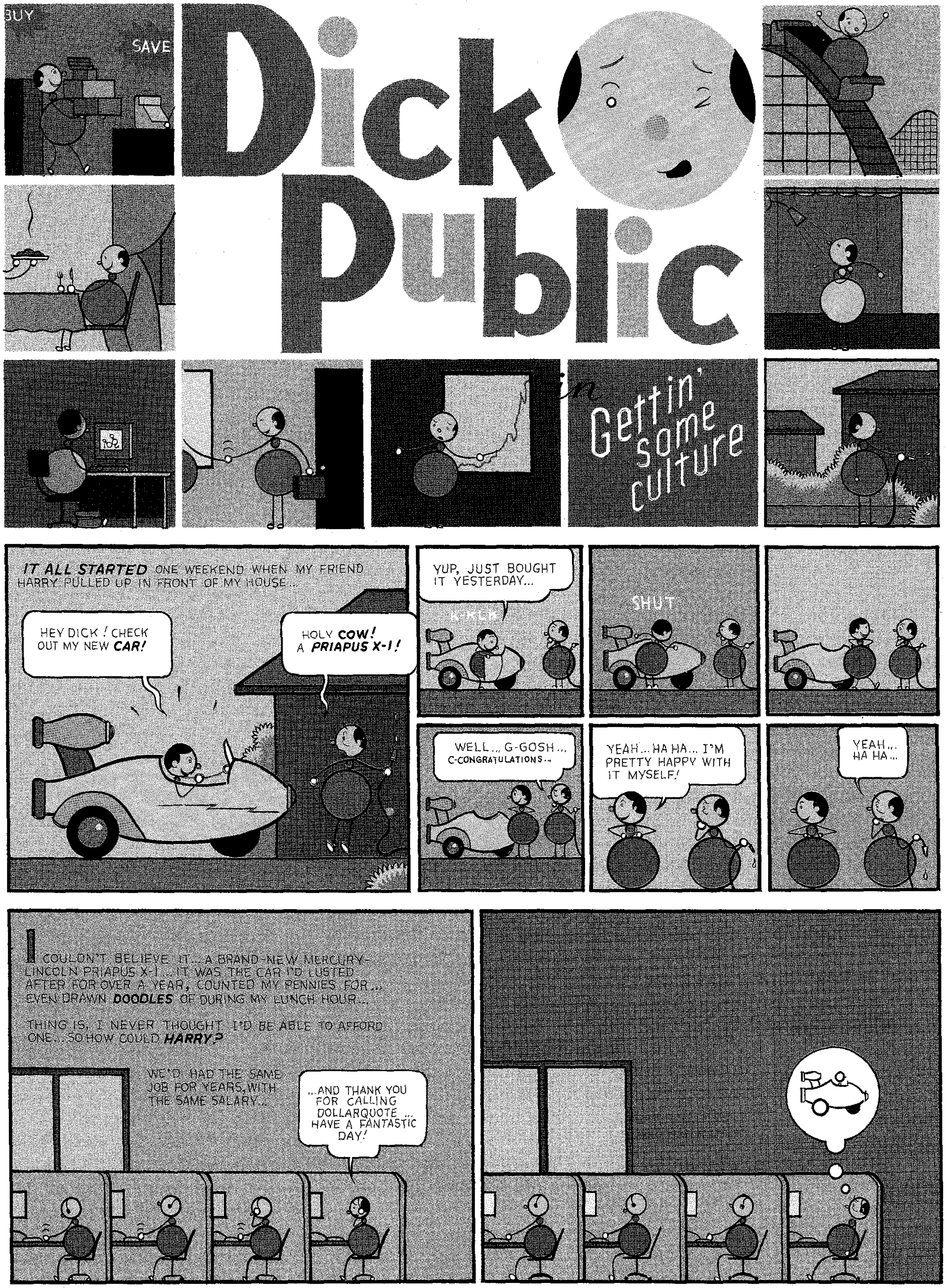
They glance back, and Nark, uncharacteristically energetic, gives him the finger. As they walk on, Nigel makes a limp-wristed dismissive gesture. The general has been indecisive, the troops are deserting, the humiliation is complete. Perowne, too, sees his opportunity to withdraw. He crosses the pavement, steps into the road and around his car. His keys are in the ignition. As he starts the engine, he sees Baxter in his rearview mirror, dithering between the departing factions, shouting at both. Perowne eases forward—for pride's sake, he does not want to appear hurried. The insurance is an irrelevance, and it amazes him now that he ever thought it important. He sees his racquet on the front seat beside him. This is surely the moment to slip away, while the possibility remains that he can still rescue his game. ♦

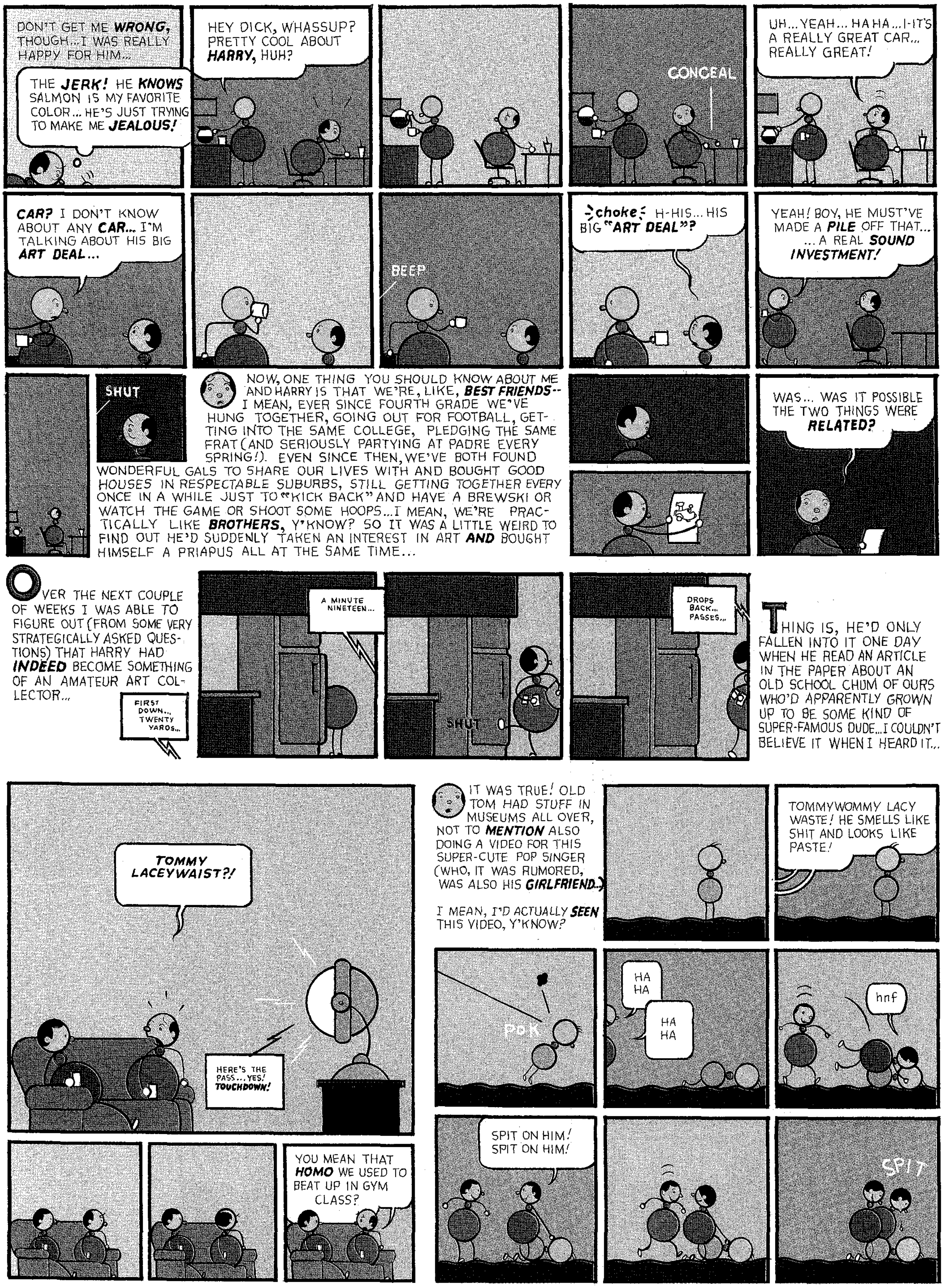


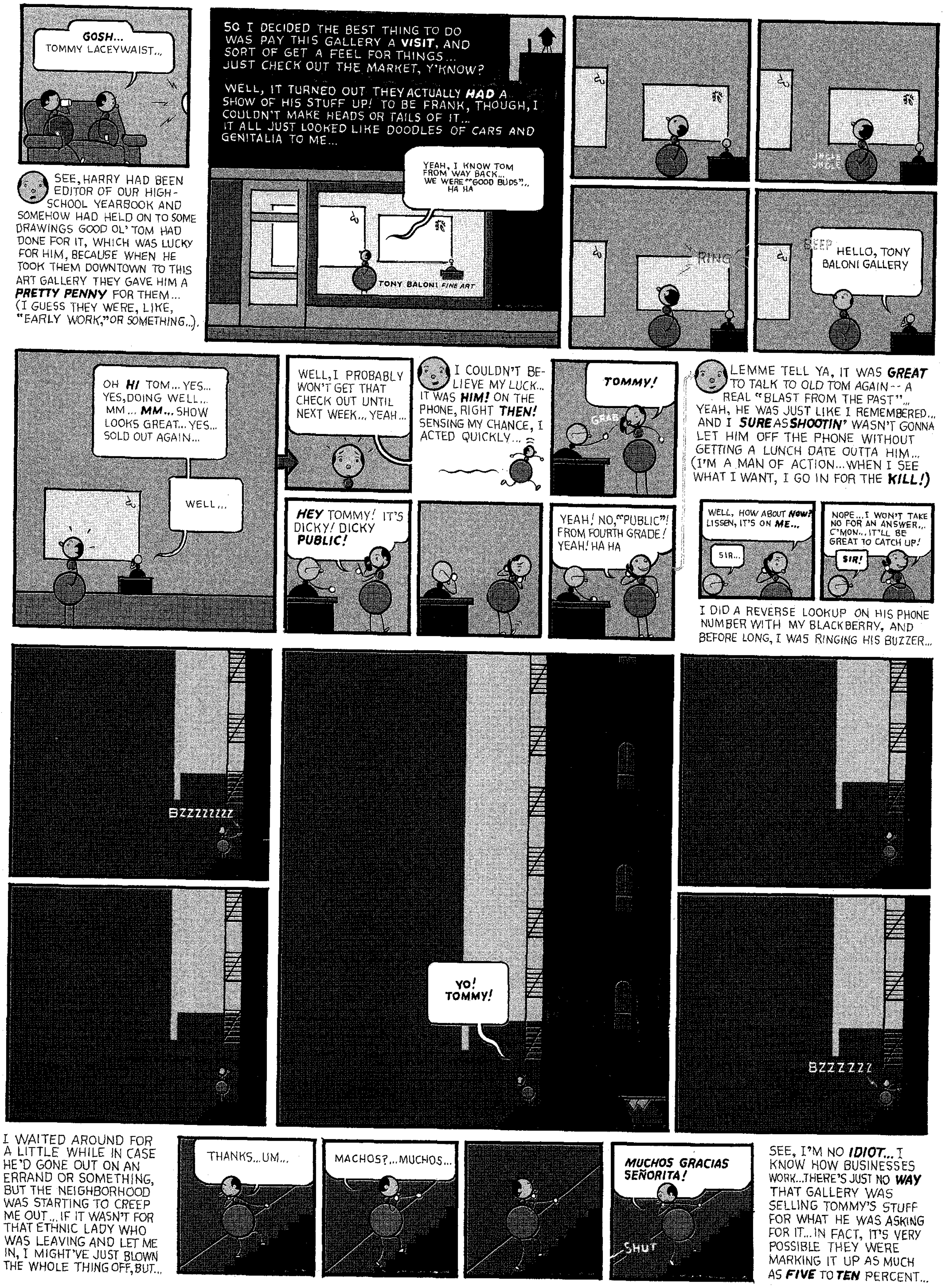
"How do I know you're not going to turn around and spend it on eggnog?"

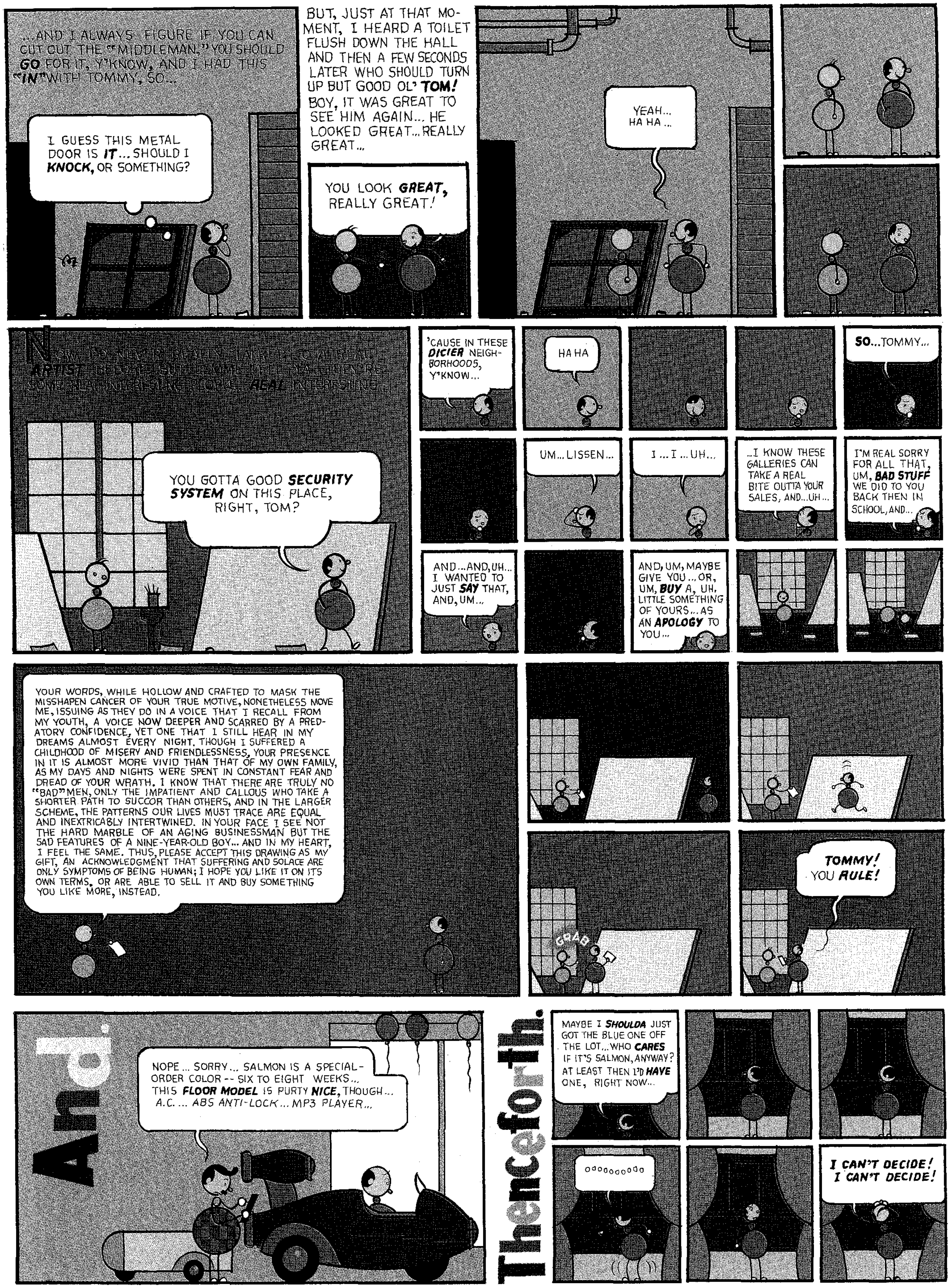
• •

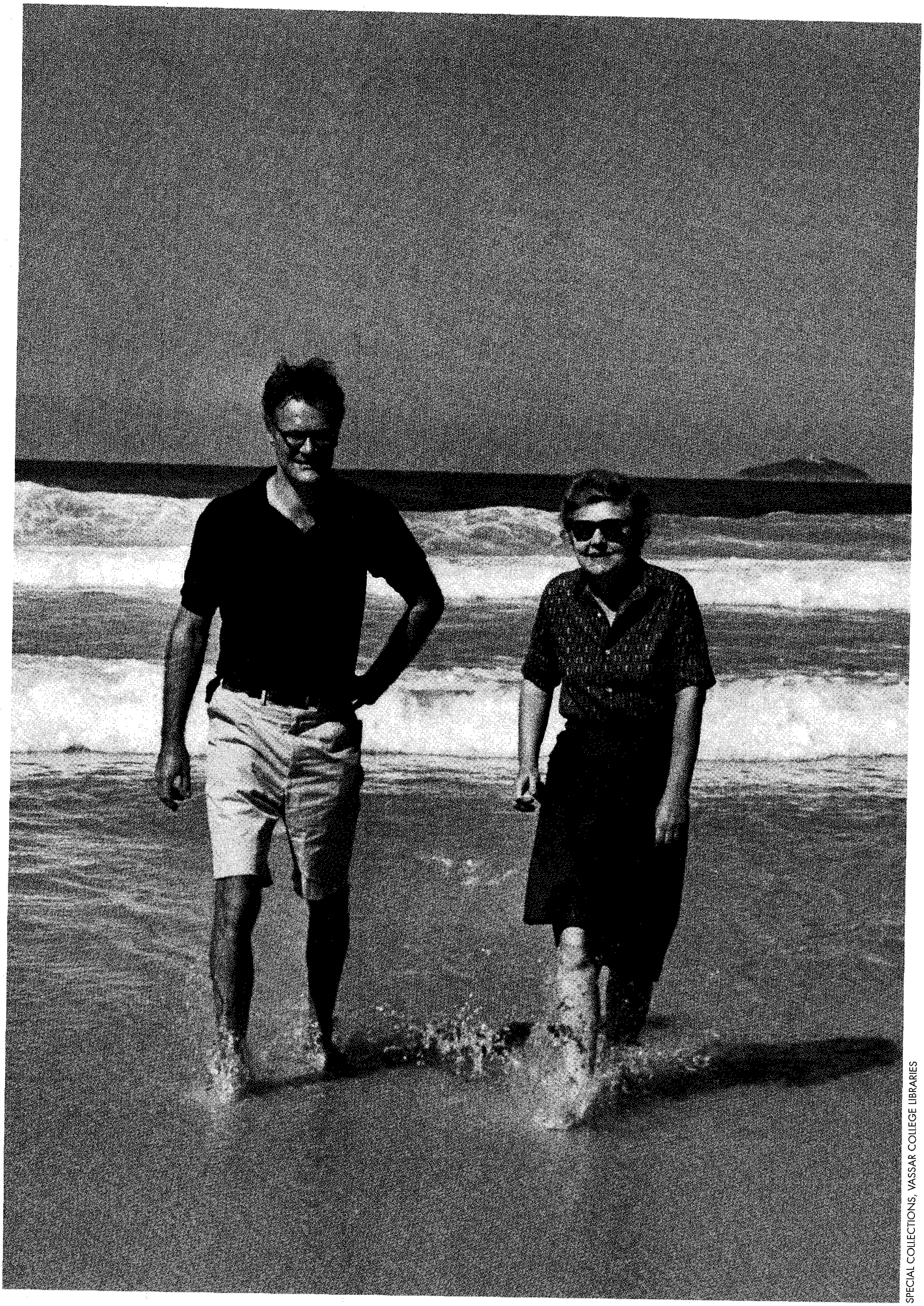
SITUATION COMEDY BY CHRIS WARE


BUY
SAVE
Dick Public
in
Gettin' some culture
IT ALL STARTED ONE WEEKEND WHEN MY FRIEND HARRY PULLED UP IN FRONT OF MY HOUSE...
HEY DICK! CHECK OUT MY NEW CAR!
HOLY COW! A PRIAPUS X-1!
YUP, JUST BOUGHT IT YESTERDAY...
K-KLIK
SHUT
WELL... G-GOSH... C-CONGRATULATIONS...
YEAH... HA HA... I'M PRETTY HAPPY WITH IT MYSELF!
YEAH... HA HA...
I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT... A BRAND-NEW MERCURY-LINCOLN PRIAPUS X-1... IT WAS THE CAR I'D LUSTED AFTER FOR OVER A YEAR, COUNTED MY PENNIES FOR... EVEN DRAWN DOODLES OF DURING MY LUNCH HOUR...
THING IS, I NEVER THOUGHT I'D BE ABLE TO AFFORD ONE... SO HOW COULD HARRY?
WE'D HAD THE SAME JOB FOR YEARS, WITH THE SAME SALARY...
...AND THANK YOU FOR CALLING DOLLARQUOTE... HAVE A FANTASTIC DAY!


DON'T GET ME WRONG, THOUGH...I WAS REALLY HAPPY FOR HIM...
THE JERK! HE KNOWS SALMON IS MY FAVORITE COLOR... HE'S JUST TRYING TO MAKE ME JEALOUS!
HEY DICK, WHASSUP? PRETTY COOL ABOUT HARRY, HUH?
CONCEAL
UH...YEAH... HA HA...I-IT'S A REALLY GREAT CAR... REALLY GREAT!
CAR? I DON'T KNOW ABOUT ANY CAR... I'M TALKING ABOUT HIS BIG ART DEAL...
BEEP
choke H-HIS... HIS BIG "ART DEAL"?
YEAH! BOY, HE MUST'VE MADE A PILE OFF THAT... ...A REAL SOUND INVESTMENT!
SHUT
NOW, ONE THING YOU SHOULD KNOW ABOUT ME AND HARRY IS THAT WE'RE, LIKE, BEST FRIENDS-- I MEAN, EVER SINCE FOURTH GRADE WE'VE HUNG TOGETHER, GOING OUT FOR FOOTBALL, GETTING INTO THE SAME COLLEGE, PLEDGING THE SAME FRAT (AND SERIOUSLY PARTYING AT PADRE EVERY SPRING!). EVEN SINCE THEN, WE'VE BOTH FOUND WONDERFUL GALS TO SHARE OUR LIVES WITH AND BOUGHT GOOD HOUSES IN RESPECTABLE SUBURBS, STILL GETTING TOGETHER EVERY ONCE IN A WHILE JUST TO "KICK BACK" AND HAVE A BREWSKI OR WATCH THE GAME OR SHOOT SOME HOOPS...I MEAN, WE'RE PRACTICALLY LIKE BROTHERS, Y'KNOW? SO IT WAS A LITTLE WEIRD TO FIND OUT HE'D SUDDENLY TAKEN AN INTEREST IN ART AND BOUGHT HIMSELF A PRIAPUS ALL AT THE SAME TIME...
WAS... WAS IT POSSIBLE THE TWO THINGS WERE RELATED?
OVER THE NEXT COUPLE OF WEEKS I WAS ABLE TO FIGURE OUT (FROM SOME VERY STRATEGICALLY ASKED QUESTIONS) THAT HARRY HAD INDEED BECOME SOMETHING OF AN AMATEUR ART COLLECTOR...
FIRST DOWN... TWENTY YARDS...
A MINUTE NINETEEN...
SHUT
DROPS BACK... PASSES...
THING IS, HE'D ONLY FALLEN INTO IT ONE DAY WHEN HE READ AN ARTICLE IN THE PAPER ABOUT AN OLD SCHOOL CHUM OF OURS WHO'D APPARENTLY GROWN UP TO BE SOME KIND OF SUPER-FAMOUS DUDE...I COULDN'T BELIEVE IT WHEN I HEARD IT...
TOMMY LACEYWAIST?!
HERE'S THE PASS...YES! TOUCHDOWN!
YOU MEAN THAT HOMO WE USED TO BEAT UP IN GYM CLASS?
IT WAS TRUE! OLD TOM HAD STUFF IN MUSEUMS ALL OVER, NOT TO MENTION ALSO DOING A VIDEO FOR THIS SUPER-CUTE POP SINGER (WHO, IT WAS RUMORED, WAS ALSO HIS GIRLFRIEND.)
I MEAN, I'D ACTUALLY SEEN THIS VIDEO, Y'KNOW?
TOMMYWOMMY LACY WASTE! HE SMELLS LIKE SHIT AND LOOKS LIKE PASTE!
POK
HA HA
HA HA
hnf
SPIT ON HIM! SPIT ON HIM!
SPIT


GOSH... TOMMY LACEYWAIST...
SEE, HARRY HAD BEEN EDITOR OF OUR HIGH-SCHOOL YEARBOOK AND SOMEHOW HAD HELD ON TO SOME DRAWINGS GOOD OL' TOM HAD DONE FOR IT, WHICH WAS LUCKY FOR HIM, BECAUSE WHEN HE TOOK THEM DOWNTOWN TO THIS ART GALLERY THEY GAVE HIM A **PRETTY PENNY** FOR THEM... (I GUESS THEY WERE, LIKE, "EARLY WORK," OR SOMETHING...).
SO I DECIDED THE BEST THING TO DO WAS PAY THIS GALLERY A **VISIT**, AND SORT OF GET A FEEL FOR THINGS... JUST CHECK OUT THE MARKET, Y'KNOW?
WELL, IT TURNED OUT THEY ACTUALLY **HAD** A SHOW OF HIS STUFF UP! TO BE FRANK, THOUGH, I COULDN'T MAKE HEADS OR TAILS OF IT... IT ALL JUST LOOKED LIKE DOODLES OF CARS AND GENITALIA TO ME...
YEAH, I KNOW TOM FROM WAY BACK... WE WERE "GOOD BUDS"... HA HA
TONY BALONI FINE ART
JINGLE JINGLE
RING
BEEP
HELLO, TONY BALONI GALLERY
OH **HI** TOM... YES... YES, DOING WELL... MM... **MM...** SHOW LOOKS GREAT... YES... SOLD OUT AGAIN...
WELL...
WELL, I PROBABLY WON'T GET THAT CHECK OUT UNTIL NEXT WEEK... YEAH...
I COULDN'T BELIEVE MY LUCK... IT WAS **HIM!** ON THE PHONE, RIGHT **THEN!** SENSING MY CHANCE, I ACTED QUICKLY...
TOMMY!
GRAB
LEMME TELL YA, IT WAS **GREAT** TO TALK TO OLD TOM AGAIN -- A REAL "BLAST FROM THE PAST"... YEAH, HE WAS JUST LIKE I REMEMBERED... AND I **SURE AS SHOOTIN'** WASN'T GONNA LET HIM OFF THE PHONE WITHOUT GETTING A LUNCH DATE OUTTA HIM... (I'M A MAN OF ACTION... WHEN I SEE WHAT I WANT, I GO IN FOR THE **KILL!**)
HEY TOMMY! IT'S DICKY! DICKY **PUBLIC!**
YEAH! NO, "PUBLIC"! FROM FOURTH GRADE! YEAH! HA HA
WELL, HOW ABOUT **NOW?** LISSEN, IT'S ON **ME...**
SIR...
NOPE... I WON'T TAKE NO FOR AN ANSWER... C'MON... IT'LL BE GREAT TO CATCH UP!
SIR!
I DID A REVERSE LOOKUP ON HIS PHONE NUMBER WITH MY BLACKBERRY, AND BEFORE LONG, I WAS RINGING HIS BUZZER...
BZZZZZZZZ
YO! TOMMY!
BZZZZZZ
I WAITED AROUND FOR A LITTLE WHILE IN CASE HE'D GONE OUT ON AN ERRAND OR SOMETHING, BUT THE NEIGHBORHOOD WAS STARTING TO CREEP ME OUT... IF IT WASN'T FOR THAT ETHNIC LADY WHO WAS LEAVING AND LET ME IN, I MIGHT'VE JUST BLOWN THE WHOLE THING OFF, BUT...
THANKS... UM...
MACHOS?... MUCHOS...
MUCHOS GRACIAS SEÑORITA!
SHUT
SEE, I'M NO **IDIOT...** I KNOW HOW BUSINESSES WORK... THERE'S JUST NO **WAY** THAT GALLERY WAS SELLING TOMMY'S STUFF FOR WHAT HE WAS ASKING FOR IT... IN FACT, IT'S VERY POSSIBLE THEY WERE MARKING IT UP AS MUCH AS **FIVE** TO **TEN** PERCENT...


...AND I ALWAYS FIGURE IF YOU CAN CUT OUT THE "MIDDLEMAN," YOU SHOULD GO FOR IT, Y'KNOW, AND I HAD THIS "IN" WITH TOMMY, SO...
I GUESS THIS METAL DOOR IS IT... SHOULD I KNOCK, OR SOMETHING?
BUT, JUST AT THAT MOMENT, I HEARD A TOILET FLUSH DOWN THE HALL AND THEN A FEW SECONDS LATER WHO SHOULD TURN UP BUT GOOD OL' TOM! BOY, IT WAS GREAT TO SEE HIM AGAIN... HE LOOKED GREAT... REALLY GREAT...
YOU LOOK GREAT, REALLY GREAT!
YEAH... HA HA...
NOW, I'D NEVER REALLY TALKED TO A REAL ARTIST BEFORE, BUT LEMME TELL YA, THEY'RE SOME REAL INTERESTING PEOPLE... REAL INTERESTING.
YOU GOTTA GOOD SECURITY SYSTEM ON THIS PLACE, RIGHT, TOM?
'CAUSE IN THESE DICIER NEIGHBORHOODS, Y'KNOW...
HA HA
SO... TOMMY...
UM... LISSEN...
I... I... UH...
...I KNOW THESE GALLERIES CAN TAKE A REAL BITE OUTTA YOUR SALES, AND... UH...
I'M REAL SORRY FOR ALL THAT, UM, BAD STUFF WE DID TO YOU BACK THEN IN SCHOOL, AND...
AND... AND, UH... I WANTED TO JUST SAY THAT, AND, UM...
AND, UM, MAYBE GIVE YOU... OR, UM, BUY A, UH, LITTLE SOMETHING OF YOURS... AS AN APOLOGY TO YOU...
YOUR WORDS, WHILE HOLLOW AND CRAFTED TO MASK THE MISSHAPEN CANCER OF YOUR TRUE MOTIVE, NONETHELESS MOVE ME, ISSUING AS THEY DO IN A VOICE THAT I RECALL FROM MY YOUTH, A VOICE NOW DEEPER AND SCARRED BY A PREDATORY CONFIDENCE, YET ONE THAT I STILL HEAR IN MY DREAMS ALMOST EVERY NIGHT. THOUGH I SUFFERED A CHILDHOOD OF MISERY AND FRIENDLESSNESS, YOUR PRESENCE IN IT IS ALMOST MORE VIVID THAN THAT OF MY OWN FAMILY, AS MY DAYS AND NIGHTS WERE SPENT IN CONSTANT FEAR AND DREAD OF YOUR WRATH. I KNOW THAT THERE ARE TRULY NO "BAD" MEN, ONLY THE IMPATIENT AND CALLOUS WHO TAKE A SHORTER PATH TO SUCCOR THAN OTHERS, AND IN THE LARGER SCHEME, THE PATTERNS OUR LIVES MUST TRACE ARE EQUAL AND INEXTRICABLY INTERTWINED. IN YOUR FACE I SEE NOT THE HARD MARBLE OF AN AGING BUSINESSMAN BUT THE SAD FEATURES OF A NINE-YEAR-OLD BOY... AND IN MY HEART, I FEEL THE SAME. THUS, PLEASE ACCEPT THIS DRAWING AS MY GIFT, AN ACKNOWLEDGMENT THAT SUFFERING AND SOLACE ARE ONLY SYMPTOMS OF BEING HUMAN; I HOPE YOU LIKE IT ON ITS OWN TERMS, OR ARE ABLE TO SELL IT AND BUY SOMETHING YOU LIKE MORE, INSTEAD.
GRAB
TOMMY! YOU RULE!
And
NOPE... SORRY... SALMON IS A SPECIAL-ORDER COLOR -- SIX TO EIGHT WEEKS... THIS FLOOR MODEL IS PURTY NICE, THOUGH... A.C. ... ABS ANTI-LOCK... MP3 PLAYER...
Thenceforth.
MAYBE I SHOULDA JUST GOT THE BLUE ONE OFF THE LOT... WHO CARES IF IT'S SALMON, ANYWAY? AT LEAST THEN I'D HAVE ONE, RIGHT NOW...
oooooooooo
I CAN'T DECIDE! I CAN'T DECIDE!



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LIFE AND LETTERS

DEAR ELIZABETH

One poet writes to another.

BY ROBERT LOWELL

Elizabeth Bishop and Robert Lowell were introduced to each other in New York in 1947, by the poet and critic Randall Jarrell. Lowell had just published his second book of poems, "Lord Weary's Castle," and Bishop her first, "North & South." Bishop approached the evening, she later wrote, "in fear and trembling." When Lowell arrived, in a wrinkled suit, and looking as though he needed a haircut and a new pair of shoes, she said, "I loved him at first sight."

"Lord Weary's Castle" won the Pulitzer Prize, and Lowell was named Consultant in Poetry to the Library of Congress. He was in the habit of discussing his poetic practice with other poets, but for Bishop their meeting "was the first time I had ever actually talked with someone about how one writes poetry." It was "like exchanging recipes for making a cake."

Lowell's letters to Bishop, from which this edited selection is drawn, cover a period of thirty years, spanning his successive marriages—to Jean Stafford, Elizabeth Hardwick, and Caroline Blackwood—and his harrowing breakdowns, a result of the manic-depressive illness that afflicted him all his life. (He was hospitalized for the first time two years after they met.)

Lowell looked after Bishop from afar, helping to arrange for grants and fellowships at crucial junctures. He considered her the best poet of their generation, and often told her so: "Anyone who builds on rock as you do can take her time—let the world come to you." Bishop, for her part, felt safe confessing her shyness to him. She also had an abiding admiration for his work, writing to him in 1961, from Brazil, "Your star couldn't be higher—and looking as big and bright as Venus does here these evenings."

Yaddo
Saratoga Springs, N.Y.
August 21, 1947

Dear Elizabeth:

(You must be called that; I'm called Cal, but I won't explain why. None of the prototypes are flattering: Calvin, Caligula, Caliban, Calvin Coolidge, Calligraphy—with merciless irony.)

I'm glad you wrote me, because it gives me an excuse to tell you how much I liked your *New Yorker* Fish poem. Perhaps, it's your best. Anyway I felt very envious in reading it—I'm a fisherman myself, but all my fish become symbols, alas! The description has great splendor, and the human part, tone etc., is just right.

I expect to be in New York sometime between Sept. 1 & 14 on my way to Washington, and if you're there then we'll try to have the dinner we missed last spring.

Sincerely yours,
Robert Lowell

P.S. Thanks for all the pleasant undeserved things you said in your letter.

Library of Congress
Washington, D.C.
July 2, 1948

Dear Elizabeth:

Would you like me to write Mrs. Ames about inviting you to Yaddo? Get Miss Moore to write too. You can't invite yourself, though, of course, almost all the invitations are planned. It would be marvelous to have you there. I know the solitude that gets too much. It doesn't *drug* me, but I get fantastic and uncivilized.

At last my divorce [from Jean Stafford] is over. It's funny at my age to have one's life so much in and on one's hands. All the rawness of learning, what I used to think should be done with by twenty-five. Sometimes nothing is so solid to me as writing—I suppose that's what vocation means—at times a torment, a bad conscience, but all in all, purpose and direction, so I'm thankful, and call it good, as Eliot would say.

Amsterdam, Holland
November 6, 1951

Dear Elizabeth:

At this point you must be saying "why Holland?" Everyone has. I suppose it's the carless automobileless man, who has no command of foreign languages or scoutsmanship's substitute for burying himself in Ischia or Sardinia. It is quiet and still—as far as the outer world goes, I guess it has been still since the seventeenth century, when it was at the full tide, a baroque, worldly, Presbyterian, canal-and-brick, glorious Boston. I've been reading Motley and Fromentin, and rather luxuriate in it; but it is prosy and empty, and Elizabeth [Hardwick] doesn't like it at all. However, we have no money to unsettle again until May. By the way the returns from my book have been rather a shock: the royalties just about cancel off the cost for revisions.

We are just finished with Mother's visit. She is a very competent, stubborn, uncurious, unBohemian woman with a genius for squeezing luxury out of rocks. That is, she has a long memory for pre-war and pre-First World War service; and thinks nothing of calling the American ambassador if there's no toilet-paper on the train etc. Well, under the best conditions, of course, I can't begin to make sense out of her or to her. Each year since I was eighteen, it's gotten worse. I don't suppose you can imagine three months with the three of us, all behaving very badly, then being very self-sacrificing, and fuming inside like the burning stuffings of an overstuffed Dutch chair. Now it's over; we have emerged triumphantly—so we thought, but there's a relapse and weakness, such as one gets from sulphur drugs.

Write me some American gossip, and heaven's sake hurry over here.

"Sometimes you just have to stop and bitch about the roses."

• •

Iowa City, Iowa
November 29, 1953

Dear Elizabeth:

I guess you've heard about Dylan Thomas's death. He died four days after a brain stroke which seems to have immediately finished his mind. The details are rather gorgeously grim. He was two days incommunicado with some girl in some New York hotel. Then his wife came, first cabling "eternal hate," and tried quite literally to kill *and* sleep with everyone in sight. Or so the rumors go in Chicago and Iowa City. It's a story that Thomas himself would have told better than anyone else; I suppose his life was short and shining as he wanted it—life, alas, is no joke.

What other news is there? Randall's [Randall Jarrell] writing a college novel with Mary McCarthy as the heroine. *PR* [*Partisan Review*] has refused to print sections; they all say it is bad and not fiction etc. and wait with watering mouths for Mary to read it. Fiction or not, it's rather terrific writing. Randall and I are doing an anthology of modern poetry—we want things like fifty Yeats, fifty Hardy etc. that cost like hell. I fear we will be paying Harcourt Brace a hundred dollars a month for the rest of our lives. Elizabeth is finishing her novel. I'm teaching Homer. My car won't start in the snow. We want to have a child as soon as we get to Duxbury. (Really!) I've been so busy finding ways to make teaching easy that I haven't done a stroke of work. Write us soon and come and stay with us next summer.

Iowa City, Iowa
January 1, 1954

Dearest Elizabeth:

We're both sick of Iowa City. Also I'm sick of explaining to Elizabeth why she shouldn't be. She has just finished her novel. It "centers" about a student murder that happened in 1950 when we were first here. It's the best thing she's done, very stern with a subdued satirical edge. And everything she tactfully didn't say about the locale is tearing through her. So here we are in the beginning of the New Year. It has just occurred to me that I haven't done a lick of preparation for my nine one-hour lectures on American poetry to be given in Cincinnati in a little over a month. How I wish I'd been reading Americana instead of Homer and Pindar!

Do you stop in the States on your way to Europe? I wish with all my heart that you could somehow stretch things and see us. We seem attached to each other by some stiff piece of wire, so that each time one moves, the other moves in another direction. We should call a halt to that.

Now, to end impersonally. I saw Pound some two weeks ago at St. Elizabeth's, the first time in four years. It's a shock how unchanged he was, the same list of books (when he learned I was only to be there for the day, he brushed aside human amenities, plunged in medias res, and told me how to teach history from 1830-1860), the same rhetoric. But he's much fatter and healthier, jumps about, dances like a bear and no longer complains of memory gaps. O I think He has lived because he has wanted to, and Thomas didn't— No I don't mean that exactly, Thomas wanted to live burning, burning out.

So we. I want to live to be old, and want you to.

Boston, Mass.
Sunday, November 14, 1954

My Dearest Elizabeth:

A lot of water has gone under the mill-wheel, since we were last writing almost a year ago now. I have been sick again, and somehow even with you I shrink both from mentioning and not mentioning it. These things come on with a gruesome, vulgar, blasting surge of "enthusiasm," one becomes a kind of man-aping balloon in a parade—then you subside and eat bitter coffee-grounds of dullness, guilt etc. Please don't worry anymore, all the pieces have been picked up, and (but I see I have already used at least five discordant metaphors) life has licked up.

I wish you could see our sunny-side of Commonwealth Ave. apartment. We are three twenty-foot flights up and look on two decaying churches and Boston's two hugest and most imperial life-insurance buildings. We have great rooms, look down on society, see at least one parade a month, and can't get the former tenant out of our heads—she had made her own world here, for twenty-six years she lived buried in ice-packs, siphons, trash, mammoth rose-wall-paper, signs of the zodiac and twenty-six birds, half of them uncaged. We are very, very tame in comparison.

Boston, Mass.
June 18, 1956

Dearest Elizabeth:

We are going to have a child. It will come sometime in January and already *we* are exhausted. We lie about on sofas all day eating cornflakes, no-calorie ginger-ale and yoghurt. Elizabeth never moves except to turn the page of an English newspaper or buy a dress. I never move except to turn on my hi-fi radio or go on expeditions for second-hand books. This isn't quite how it really is, but the last four days here have been scorchers, ninety-four on our coldest floor and we are very disorganized and cynical. But how we boast! People whom I had utterly felt cut off from: my barber, my dentist, the head of the Boston University English department, wives of friends, children . . . to all of them I can't stop talking and bragging. Elizabeth had a rather painful first month and still feels languid but is much more comfortable. We hear of women (Eleanor Clark) who ski all through pregnancy, give birth in bomb shelters without doctors etc. But we don't approve, and are timid, delicate and ante-bellum.

You are on Mary McCarthy's good books, though few others are. She boasts on her book jackets of editing a college magazine with you, was very eager for you to get all the poetry prizes and gave your childhood background but not you to one of the characters in her last novel. But she is very high horse with success, has said that my poems are brassy, that Elizabeth's next to last *New Yorker* story sounds like Jean Stafford, and advised Arthur Schlesinger not to publish his ten-year opus on F.D.R.

Boston, Mass.
February 7, 1957

Dearest Elizabeth:

Upstairs, Harriet Winslow Lowell is crying as rhythmically as breathing. Lizzie and our beaverlike professional baby nurse, Miss Elsemore, are not in theoretic or emotional agreement. Miss Elsemore, red-haired, dumpy, in her late fifties, supported by forty years' practice and pre Dr. Spock's baby book, believes in letting a baby cry before eating. Poor Lizzie isn't allowed to play with Harriet except for thirty minutes between six and six-thirty when she would like to be relaxing over an old-fashioned. Morning, noon and night, our house shakes, quakes and continues to stand while the opposites war—thesis and antithesis, lion and unicorn and nothing resolved except that Miss Elsemore remains in the saddle but not unchallenged. The worst is that Miss Elsemore is so devoted, accomplished and even, in her expert style, gentle, that any substitute would be unthinkable and we have even committed ourselves to hiring as her eventual successor and *long*-term nurse, Ann (no Miss), an elderly and very talkative and ladylike Anglo-Irish Quebec spinster, Miss Elsemore's girl-friend.

I'm really mad about my little daughter and feel as though I had been up to now lacking some prime faculty: eyesight, hearing, reason.

Castine, Maine
August 9, 1957

Dear Elizabeth:

Thanks for speaking to Lizzie about your misgivings. I see clearly now that for the last few days I have been living in a state of increasing mania—almost off the rails at the end. It almost seems as if I couldn't be with you any length of time without acting with abysmal myopia and lack of consideration. My disease, alas, gives one (during its seizures) a headless heart.

I am not going to write very much now, but I do want you and Lota [de Macedo Soares, Bishop's companion from 1952 to 1967] to know that I *am* at last in reverse. I am taking my anti-manic pills—75 mgs. of Sparine, no more than what my doctor prescribed on the bottle but too much to drive a car or even see people much. The effect is something like the slowing and ache of a medium fever. One's thoughts are not directly changed and healed, but the terrible, over-riding restlessness of one's system is halted so that the mind can again see life as it is.

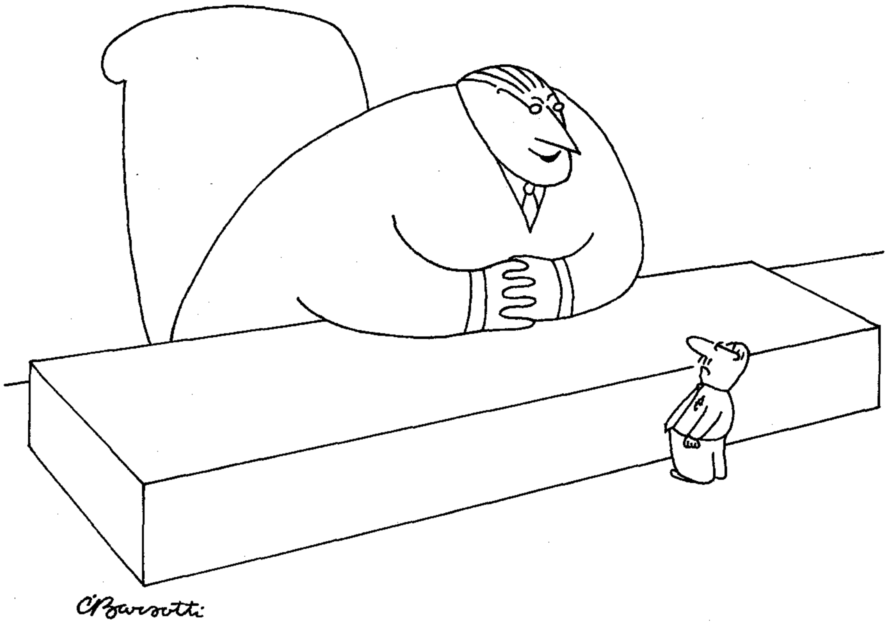
I want you to know . . . Oh dear, I wanted you to know so many things . . .

Castine, Maine
August 15, 1957

Dearest Elizabeth B.:

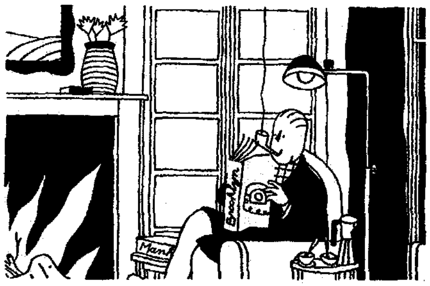
I want you to know that you need never again fear my overstepping myself and stirring up confusion with you. My frenzied behavior during your visit has a history and there is one fact that I want to disengage from all its harsh frenzy. There's one bit of the past that I would like to get off my chest and then I think all will be easy with us.

Do you remember how at the end of that long swimming and sunning Stonington day, we were talking about this and that about ourselves and you said, rather humorously yet it was truly meant, "When you write my epitaph, you must say I was the loneliest person who ever lived." Probably you forgot, and anyway all that is mercifully changed and all has come right since you found Lota. But at the time everything—I guess (I

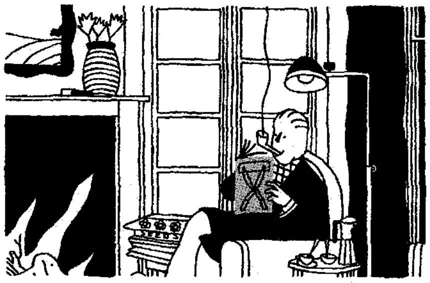


"Just as your family means a lot to you, Henderson, power means a lot to me."

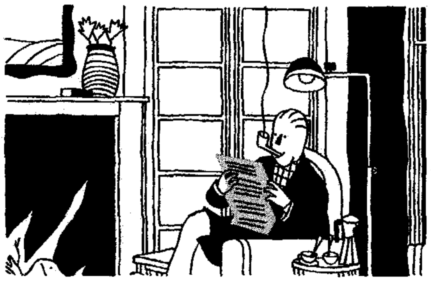
UNSUNG HEROES OF LITERATURE



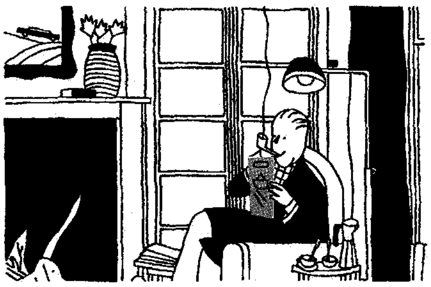
The Phone Book



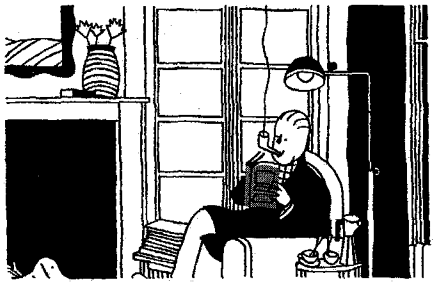
The Mail-Order Catalogue



The Lease



The Takeout Menu



The Computer Handbook

don't want to overdramatize) our relations seemed to have reached a new place. I assumed that it would be just a matter of time before I proposed and I half believed that you would accept. Yet I wanted it all to have the right build-up. Well, I didn't say anything then. And then there was that poetry conference at Bard and I remember one evening presided over by Mary McCarthy and my Elizabeth was there, and going home to the Bard poets' dormitory, I was so drunk that my hands turned cold and I felt half-dying and held your hand. And nothing was said, and like a loon that needs sixty feet, I believe, to take off from the water, I wanted time and space, and went on assuming, and when I was to have joined you at Key West I was determined to ask you. Really for so callous (I fear) a man, I was fearfully shy and scared of spoiling things and distrustful of being steady enough to be the least good. Yet there were a few months. I suppose we might almost claim something like apparently Strachey and Virginia Woolf. And of course there was always the other side, the fact that our friendship really wasn't a courting, was really disinterested (Bad phrase) really led to no encroachments. So it is. Let me say this though and then leave the matter forever: I do think free will is sewn into everything we do; you can't cross a street, light a cigarette, drop saccharine in your coffee without really doing it. Yet the possible alternatives that life allows us are very few, often there must be none. I've never thought there was any choice for me about writing poetry. No doubt if I used my head better, ordered my life better, worked harder etc. the poetry would be improved, and there must be many lost poems, innumerable accidents and ill-done actions. But asking you is *the* might have been for me, the one towering change, the other life that might have been had. It was that way for these nine years or so that intervened. It was deeply buried, and this spring and summer (really before your arrival) it boiled to the surface. Now it won't happen again, though of course I always feel a great blitheness and easiness with you. It won't happen, I'm really underneath utterly in love and sold on my Elizabeth and it's a great solace to me that you are with Lota, and I am sure it is the will of the heavens that all is as it is.

Boston, Mass.
Saturday, March 15, 1958

Dearest Elizabeth:

Oh dear, the record, the record! Almost immediately after writing you my last letter [the letter he is referring to has been lost], I wanted to write another taking it back. Elizabeth and I are happily back together; I spend long week-ends at home and will soon leave the hospital entirely. All the late froth and delirium have blown away. One is left strangely dumb, and talking about the past is like a cat's trying to explain climbing down a ladder. One would like to look at it all without moodiness or bravado.

I live in an interesting house now at McLean's, one in which no man had entered since perhaps 1860; suddenly it was made co-ed. It was like entering some ancient deceased sultan's seraglio. We were treated to a maze of tender fussy attentions suitable for very old ladies: chocolate-scented milk at 8:30; a lounging and snoozing bed-spread after meals, each announcement of an appointment gently repeated at ten-minute intervals, an old crone waiting on table barking like television turned on full to pierce through deafness. On the other hand, it took three days to get a shaving glass. The man next to me is a Harvard Law professor. One day, he is all happiness, giving the plots of Trollope novels, distinguishing delicately between the philosophies of Holmes and Brandeis, reminiscing wittily about Frankfurter. But on another day, his depression blankets him. Early in the morning, I hear cooing pigeon sounds, and if I listen carefully, the words "Oh terror, TERROR!" Our other male assembles microscopically exact models of clippers and three-masted schooners. Both men, and I too, shrink before a garrulous Mrs. Churchill, sometimes related to the statesman and sometimes to the novelist. Each of her sentences has a proper and usually Massachusetts name. "But of course it was really Francis Xavier Beamis Todd's son?" "How are you related to Thomas Arnold Lowell?" I assumed she meant James Russell Lowell, and was abysmally wrong and have never been able to explain. Pointing to the classical moulding on a mantelpiece, she will say, "That's Cameron Forbes, the ambassador to Japan," or begin a dinner conversation with "Speaking of Rhode Island reds . . ." Sometimes with a big paper napkin stuck

LAURENT CILLUFFO

like an escaping bra on her throat, she will dance a little jig and talk about being presented to Queen Victoria. She was.

I've filled this letter with trivia. Things are really very well. I seem to have come out of this awfully quickly and easily, I am faithfully contracted to a very keen doctor, and Elizabeth and I are very much at ease and thankful to be together. Let's not let my slip into the monstrous cloud our love. Love to Lota.

Boston, Mass.
April 7, 1959

Dearest Elizabeth:

The other night Ginsberg, Corso and Orlovsky came to call on me. As you know, our house, as Lizzie says, is nothing if not pretentious. Planned to stun such people. When they came in, they all took off their wet shoes and tiptoed upstairs. They are phony in a way because they have made a lot of publicity out of very little talent. But in another way, they are pathetic and doomed. How can you make a go for long by reciting so-so verse to half-jeering swarms of college students? However, they are trying, I guess, to write poetry. They are fairly easy to listen to. There was an awful lot of subdued talk about their being friends and lovers, and once Ginsberg and Orlovsky disappeared in unison to the john and reappeared on each other's shoulders. I haven't had the heart to tell this to Lizzie or anyone else. They also talked a lot about entering the lion's cave, a reference, I think, to my "David and Bathsheba." I think they'll die of TB.

Sorry to hear about Marianne's [Marianne Moore] stroke. Did I write you about visiting poor old Bill Williams, very mournful, enjoying one day out of seven, waiting for the end, the nervous system cracking, but not the mind and courage. But it would be heaven if somehow something could bring you back for a visit next September. I feel so forlorn without you, though this has been a happy year. There's no one else I can quite talk to with confidence and abandon and delicacy.

Castine, Maine
August 7, 1961

My Dearest Elizabeth:

The other night I had a dream about you, one of those dreams where there were many scattered people moving about like bits of wood in a current, much maneuvering and confusion. Somewhere on the edges you were, but we couldn't come together, and all was a headache of difficulties and distances. Finally you appeared in our apartment and said I am ready to take a walk, unless you intend to keep me waiting longer—it's already been hours. Well, I am expecting you this fall in New York and I won't keep you waiting.

There's something else. For the last two weeks, I haven't had a drop to drink. At first one feels removed from the living, that sociable drop gone that makes us all one species, in warmth, weakness and talkativeness. Then the air clears and steadies. I have so many holes in my soul, I imagine this is the only way for me to go through the rich jungle of New York on my own feet. So come soon, and we will gaze on the riches of the world in our odd sobriety. I can't say that you ever seemed to lose the slightest gaiety, rather the opposite!

New York, N.Y.
February 10, 1963

Dearest Elizabeth:

I suppose you have read about Frost's death, though we, through the absence of New York papers, had to be told by telephone. He has been much with me: I've written a short piece on him for a new review (guided by us, which will be a sort of intelligent New York *Times* section), talked on television, re-read quantities and talked on him to my classes at Harvard. Walking by his house in Cambridge last Thanksgiving, I thought with some shame about how wrong I was to be bothered by his notoriety and showing off. Under the great display the life was really very bounded and simple. Pound's daughter was here, looking like him and strangely like Jack Sweeney's Irish wife, Moira. She saw Frost the day before he died. "I wanted him to know that some one who loved Father didn't have bad manners." Frost said he loved Ezra and hoped to see him in Venice, where he now is in a rather better state. I have been thinking of the great callousness and bravado of Ezra's existence, so free one might have half-thought of most men's waverings, feelings of being a copy, of not pursuing the goal etc. Then the shell breaks and the cold air tortures the exposed flesh. Then partial recovery, though the other was a recovery of humanity.

New York, N.Y.
October 27, 1963

Dearest Elizabeth:

Have you read the posthumous poems by Sylvia Plath? A terrifying and stunning group has come out in the last *Encounter*. You probably know the story of her suicide. The poems are all about it. They seem as good to me as Emily Dickinson at the moment. Of course they are as extreme as one can bear, rather more so, but whatever wrecked her life somehow gave an edge, freedom and even control, to her poetry. There's a lot of surrealism which relieves the heat of direct memory, touches of me, and I'm pretty sure touches of your quiet and humor. She is far better certainly than Sexton or Seidel, and almost makes one feel at first reading that almost all other poetry is about nothing. Still, it's searingly extreme, a triumph by a hair, that one almost wishes had never come about.

Harriet is having her tonsils out this week. She is quite a little lady now, learning to read, answering the phone, assembling collages of corks, package handles, drawings of boats etc. Oh, oh, oh, how time whirls us on! Do you realize that we have already outlived more than half the classic English poets. I suppose they knew no more than we what it all meant. What scatterings of experience. I do feel though that I've lost a few unbelievably narrow and stubborn poses. Do you ever feel that you have almost learned enough at last to be ready to be reborn with profit?

New York, N.Y.
January 24, 1964

Dearest Elizabeth:

I think I now have a book done, to be called "For the Union Dead," and adding up to 35 poems. It will be out in September and I'll send you galleys when I have them. I think there are half a dozen poems you haven't seen. I suppose the book tries to be an advance, whatever that means, or a sort of combination of "Life Studies" and the more metrical style of my earlier stuff. I hope you'll like it. It's a little like your work, each single poem an entity, unhelped by previous poems, though I am afraid I have far more monotony and haste.

Kennedy's murder was a terrible trauma for all of us. At first it seemed the work of a Southern fanatic, then of a leftist plot. I found myself weeping through the first afternoon, then three days of television uninterrupted by advertising till the grand, almost unbearable funeral. I guess it had something to do with my crack-up. The country went through a moment of terror and passionate chaos with everyone talking wildly, and deeply fearful and suspicious. Then there was the unbelievable relief of everything seeming to go well under Johnson. Now there's the let-down, a general prosiness perhaps, and the return to thousands of every day personal and national problems. Maybe it's just my nature, but one seems to see-saw from a sort of rosy blandness to a blank, bare cracking feeling. It's like swimming across a pond littered with pieces of wood; one wonders if one has the energy to push through it all, then one floats gaily and the current draws one forward.

New York, N.Y.
[October 18 or 19?, 1965]

My dearest Elizabeth:

I imagine you may have heard by now of Randall's death. He was undergoing treatment of an injured wrist at Chapel Hill, and "lunged" in front of a car on a main highway near a bypass. He had a bottle of pain-killer in his pocket. I've just come from the funeral and must soon leave for Harvard. I'll write you soon in detail. It cannot be told for certain whether the death was suicide or an accident. I think suicide, but I'm not sure, and Mary's version [Mary Jarrell, Jarrell's wife], the official version, is accident. All heartbreaking and ghastly. Poor Dear, he wanted to take care of himself! I'm Desolate.

New York, N.Y.
October 28, 1965

Dearest Elizabeth:

The Randall business is very awful. Did I tell you his wrist injury was from putting his hand through a window last spring, though no one knows this. He should have had a doctor who made clear to him that getting over his manic depressive attack had nothing to do with returning to his wife—my doctor has always made that point, even to the extreme of once several years ago letting me go from the hospital to an apartment where I went on with my affair, and then went back to Lizzie, knowing that I really wanted to in my soul's center. Nothing on earth can be as bad as ending your own life—I mean medically not morally—except murder. There's a small chance of accident—he was planning to have dinner with his step-daughter the next day, had begun teaching, had written one or two people that he was well and writing again, and had notes on a review of your poems which he was very keen on. In his pocket a bottle of demerol, pain-killer, that might have fuzzed his senses. I think it was suicide, and so does every one else, who knew him well. Oh but he was an absolutely gifted, and noble man, poisoned and killed, though I can't prove it, by our tasteless, superficial, brutal culture.

Castine, Maine
July 16, 1966

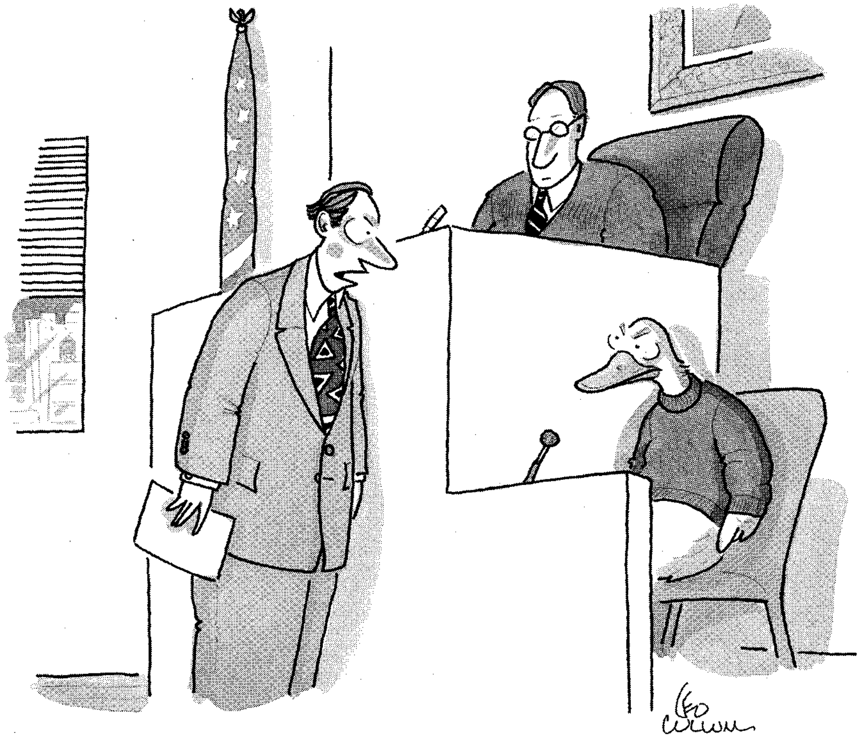
Dearest Elizabeth:

A couple of days ago Delmore Schwartz died from a heart-attack, just outside his room in a cheap New York hotel—alone, out of touch, for a year, a shadow, a rumor seen here and there, gone underground, after he vanished and hid from Syracuse University, angry he hadn't been given tenure. Maybe the heat killed him; the death rate has risen lately in New York, but really his end was in the cards for long, too much drinking, a paranoia that cut him off from jobs, even friends—for a day, there was no one to claim the body. I think back on the time, when Caroline Gordon [wife of the poet Allen Tate] said, "This is the one mature young man I've ever met." This hurt me, but I felt dismissed with a great swarm of other young men. And it seemed true in a way. "In Dreams Begin Responsibilities" had just come out, and reasonable, intuitive essays, the old new criticism, but with a new touch, in all the Quarterlies. He was much more bruised and swollen, when I knew him well, an intimate gruelling year, a year or so before you and I met—Jean and he and I, sedentary, indoors souls, talking about books and literary gossip over glasses of milk, strengthened with Maine vodka, the milk intended to restore what the vodka tore down—Delmore in an unpressed mustard gabardine, a little winded, husky voiced, unhealthy, but with a carton of varied vitamin bottles, the color of oil, quickening with Jewish humor, and in-the-knowness, and his own genius, every person, every book—motives for everything, Freud in his blood, great webs of causation, then suspicion, then rushes of rage. He was more reasonable than us, but obsessed, a much better mind, but one already chasing the dust—it was like living with a sluggish, sometimes angry spider—no hurry, no motion, Delmore's voice, almost inaudible, dead, intuitive, pointing somewhere, then the strings tightening, the roar of rage—too much, too much for us!

New York, N.Y.
September 15, 1966

Dearest Elizabeth:

What's up? It seems almost a year since I've had anything in writing from you.... In mid-summer, following my desire and ignoring my better judgment, I went to a birthday party for Jackie Kennedy—white turrety inn building at Cotuit, rooms rented for the guests by our hostess Mrs. Paul Mellon, through the afternoon glimpses of what must be fellow guests, women with hair a foot high, smiles but no introductions, the nearest I came to knowing any were Mike Nichols, Charles Addams, and Jerome Robbins—most of them were people like Forestal's son, Paley, the CBS president, people with names like big figures in news, business or politics, but often not related, or poor cousins. Launch with champagne in paper cups, harbor boat pacing our boat, wonderful sunset over Cotuit accredited to Mrs. Mellon's plans—then landing, swarms of new known-unknowns with lanterns, big tent, air of very expensive rustic simplicity. Hours of waiting, feeling that no one was known from our world to any of the other guests except Mike Nichols. Later, a luxuriously simple dinner, all I can remember are blood-red lamb chops, Mike Nichols next to Jackie, later, middle-aged people dancing the new dances, not very wildly, but too young for me, a slightly tawdry untimely Marie Antoinette feeling of a festival when the age for being wholehearted about such things has passed, the flash of the jet-set, a little lurid and in bad taste in a world of poverty and blood, a certain real ease—meeting with McNamara, Jackie putting her hand over my mouth and telling me to be polite and I saying something awkward about liking him, but not his policy, then Jackie saying "how impossibly banal, you should say you adore his policy, but find him dull." Few minutes talk with Styron and me arguing with McNamara, no great impact on either side, except that McNamara seemed a simple brilliant administrative soul, who had given little thought to moral complications, and who might have even taken the usual liberal line against Viet Nam more easily than I would. The party didn't get into the news, but somehow a month later, a gossip column in Norfolk, Virginia, reported that I stayed up till five with McNamara and we had gotten on famously, and the columnist hoped I'd learned something—all non-sense. A vague feeling of a heterogeneous opposition to Johnson group. The most interesting person to talk to was Bobby Kennedy, but like Carlos [Lacerda, Bishop's neighbor and an elected official in Brazil], there is a scary feeling of ambition and power about him, along with frankness.



"We have testimony that you walk like a duck and you quack like a duck. Tell the court—are you a duck?"

• •

London
September 11, 1970

Dearest Elizabeth:

I am living in a silly Back Bay part of London, there are many, near the Cadogan Hotel where Wilde was arrested, leading a silly but not unhappy life. I expect to get back for a couple of weeks at Christmas, and trust I'll have much time to see you.

Lizzie and I have more or less separated, though as good-naturedly as such things can be. I have someone else. And the future looks cheerful, but who at our age can ever tell? I still feel I can reach up and touch the ceiling of one's end. Yet I have nothing more serious than a tooth to be capped. I sometimes think our age is as full of unknowns as seventeen. We really couldn't see at all clearly then.

London
April 15, 1976

Dearest Elizabeth:

I liked your interview but must disappoint you by saying I'm still in free verse, written in the blue period after sickness, when I felt I could do nothing else well. On the balance side and on the side of formality, I am told all my lines are lines. I do scores of revisions to make them so. I use iambics often loosened into anapests. I suppose definitions of words in the dictionary can be made to do this—anything can be scanned but not be made into decisive lines. I meant to say that I agreed with everything you said, but not in practice. How different prose is; sometimes the two mediums just refuse to say the same things. I found this lately doing an obituary on Hannah Arendt. Without verse, without philosophy, I found it hard, I was naked without my line-ends.

New York is weird now, or so it seemed coming from the calm of Kent or even London. America and England are mirages and happy islands to each other, both an escape from prices. Caroline [Blackwood] and I both felt that New York was too anxious and running on tiptoe for us—despite (or because of) too many friends. Typical and almost first symbol, the Straus and Giroux elevators jam and have for months, and the only stairway is permanently locked, even to Bob Giroux, because of dangerous school children. One is almost congratulated for arriving in the office without much delay.

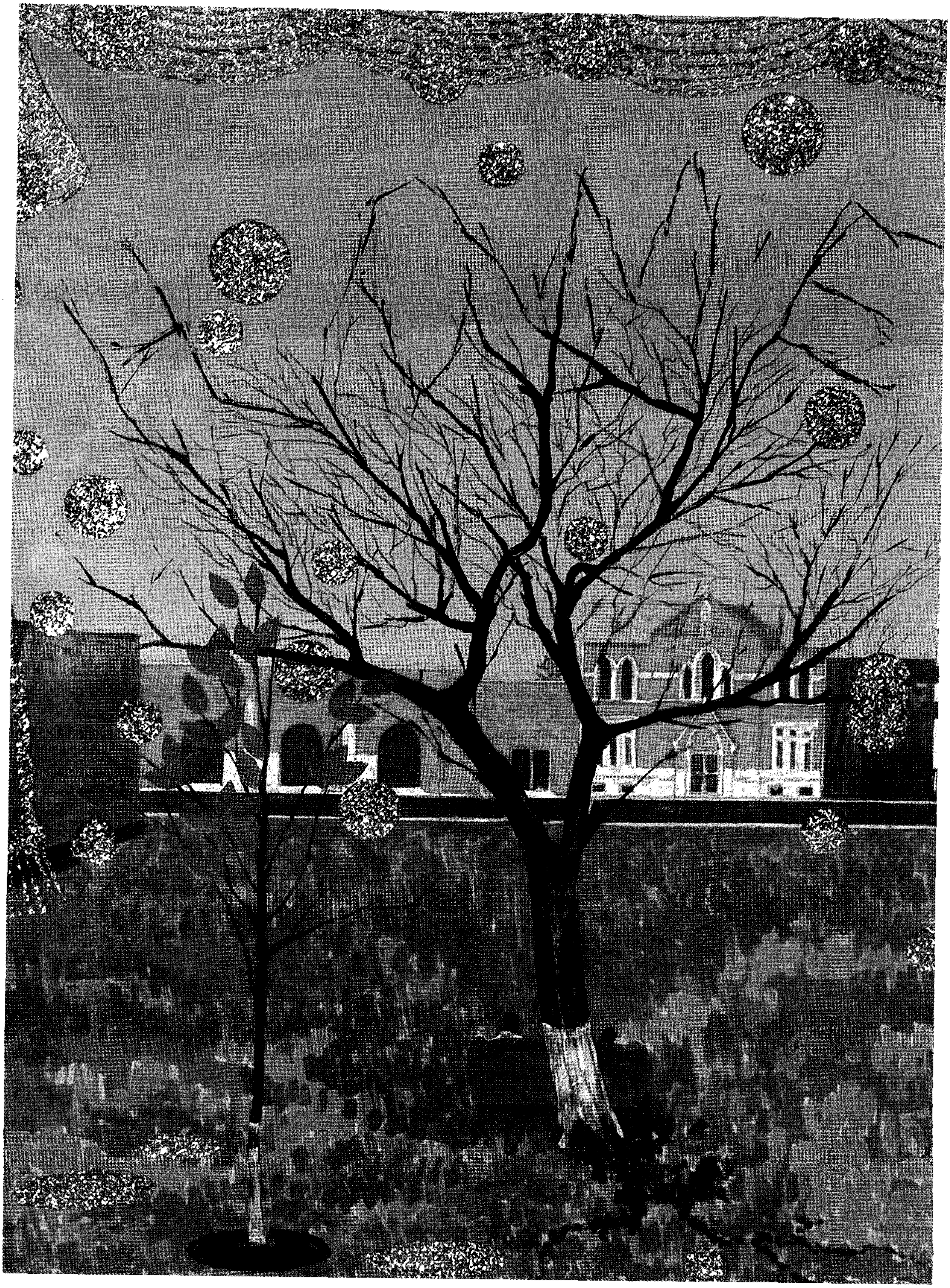
Bearsted, Maidstone, Kent
July 12, 1976

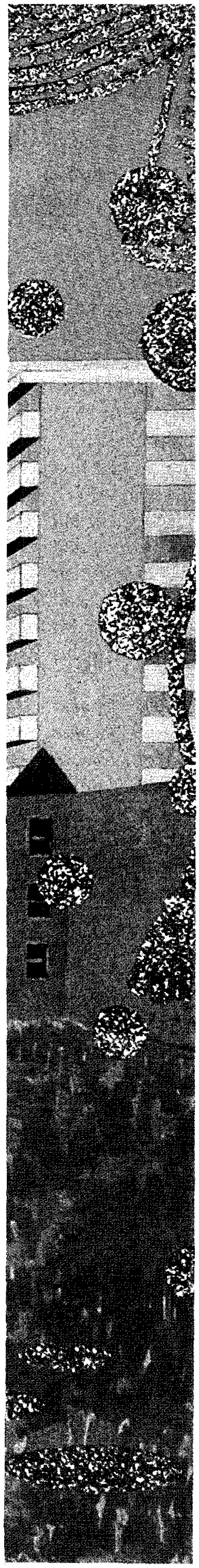
Dearest Elizabeth:

Frank [Bidart] has just told me you arrived back in Boston in a wheelchair, a sad surprise because you seemed in such good health here and safe with your new English drug.

I still thrill to your visit. After a little, it seemed as if almost thirty years had rolled back, and we were talking brown-haired callow and new in New York, Washington or Maine. Voice and image seemed much more what we were than what we are—or is the essence as it was? Glad too you liked my new poems, for I feared you mightn't. Today they are going off to Bob Giroux, and though I already miss their presence pressing on me to change, polish, do more, I have an almost physical sense of lightness, as though my shoulders weighed less, and my baggage was stored in the station for a day.

Everything now seems to carry me backward. One thing I was certain of was that England didn't have real summers like my grandfather's farm or the Tates' house in Tennessee—or at most did for no more than three successive days. But it goes on—nature's till now hidden and real heat. Sometimes I almost move to set off for the lake with my trolling rod for pickerel. How Grandfather would have pulled the place and us into order. But the soil and everything on it is crumbling and wilting, sand-browns with a blush of green. ♦





FICTION

ADAM ROBINSON

BY EDWARD P. JONES

TUESDAY

After the cab turned off East Capitol onto Eighth Street, Noah Robinson saw further evidence that trees were disappearing from Washington. Where were all the oaks and maples and birches, even the odd pear, apple, or peach tree, that had been there in the time when he did not yet know himself and the city seemed always as green as his grandparents' idea of Heaven? Even when he had become responsible for a wife and children, the trees had still been there, reminding him year after hard year how far he had to go and how far he had come. Now the landscape of the city, high and low, seemed barren, no grand trees for children playing hide-and-go-seek, no spreading refuge for old people out in the fire of summer. Why had he not noticed the death of the trees before, at age forty, at fifty-five, at sixty? When he was seven and his family first arrived in Washington, he'd had a teacher at Stevens Elementary School who taught her students about the trees of the city. Mrs. Waters hung her eyeglasses on a pink string around her neck and told them how lucky they were to have trees in Washington. The boy loved the teacher and he loved learning about trees, and he loved the way the trees told him through the teacher's words that he, pining for South Carolina, might yet be happy in this new world.

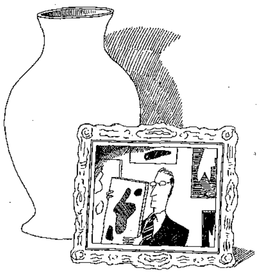
The cab now bumped its way over potholes up Eighth Street. The tree devastation had extended even to the modest showy trees, the trees that the other Washington, known for façade and neglect, might have endeavored to save. That world liked to talk only about the biggest showoffs, the trees they gave all the care to—the cherry trees. "The blossoms are coming, the blossoms are coming!" went their hallelujah each spring. But the young man Noah, ever a student of Mrs. Waters's, had known the beauty of the black locust and the paulownia, flowering away their magnificent hearts in April, May, and June. And they did so without school bands and beauty queens and tourists, without the articles in the newspapers that year after silly year heralded the cherry trees. The apartment of the woman with whom he had committed adultery was in a building that had oaks in the back yard, and once, lying with her, he had heard acorns falling and mistaken them for footsteps. And he had stayed away from the woman for weeks. His son had appreciated the trees of Washington, but his girls had found more joy in rosebushes and Queen Anne's lace, and even goldenrod, perhaps because they didn't have to climb to admire the blossoms. His son loved to climb trees and call down to his father, "Watch me!" When people died, Noah Robinson's people dreamed of them, and so far there had been no dreams about his son, the baby of the family. His son might yet be alive.

The cab approached H Street N.E. He could see that box after box meant for trees existed now only to support litter. Between the parked cars, Noah could see that the city-government people had thrown up the occasional young tree, like the one in front of his apartment building. Most of those trees had few leaves, frail generic things propped up with wooden supports. They would not live out the year. "Root, little pig, or die," his father and grandfather liked to say.

The cab turned onto H Street. Noah forgave that street for being virtually treeless, for that had always been its way. He had courted Maggie up and down H Street, with all its stores and gritty life, one symbol of a people used to doing much with less. The darkness of the Atlas Theatre on H had given him the cour-

PAINTING BY KERRY JAMES MARSHALL

age to lean over and kiss Maggie’s cheek that first time. She had not yet seen sixteen, and he still had the gentlemanly quality of the countrified South about him. Someone, some adult in a nearly empty theatre, watching them the way adults once watched over all the children in Washington, saw the quick kiss and told Maggie’s father, and he forbade her to see Noah for two months. Now, as the cab went along H Street, Maggie Robinson took her hand from Noah’s knee and placed it over his open hand resting on his thigh. She sighed, frustrated, a woman who had had time for only half a cup of coffee that morning. “I am satisfied now. I am done with having your children, Noah,” she had said to him the day after Caleb’s birth. Caleb who might yet be alive.



“Remember,” Noah said now, observing the stained and indecipherable zone map on the back of the cab’s front seat, “when you couldn’t walk down a D.C. street without trees jumpin in your way and makin a nuisance of themselves?” He had been a pallbearer at Mrs. Waters’s funeral. Because she had been a great woman and teacher, the mayor had been there, with a mouthful of expensive teeth and a manufactured brand of camaraderie that the élite schools had taught the mayor’s kind to pass off as charm among the common people. The mayor’s limousine had got lost on the way to the funeral, because it wasn’t used to going to Anacostia. In Noah’s youth, most of the politicians had confined themselves to their pen on Capitol Hill.

“I remember,” Maggie said.

“I’m sure you do.” He looked at her and winked. One tree was as good as another to her, a woman with more than two hundred years of Washingtonians behind her. He squeezed her hand and raised it and kissed it once, then once again. He had waited forever for that woman with whom he committed adultery to show up on his doorstep and tell his wife, “I laid with the father of your children.” He was still waiting. He let go of Maggie’s hand. They had been married forty-five years. Last year, to celebrate that anniversary, their friends had given them a king’s catered dinner at the Elks’ club and so many gifts that it took two cars to get the gifts home. A month later, their two-year-old granddaughter—no mother, no Caleb for a father—had come to live with them. That first night, as their granddaughter, Elsa, slept in the bed beside Maggie, he had sat most of the night in the darkened living room, looking over at a Waterford vase, one of the gifts presented at the Elks dinner. It had cost more than his grandfather earned in two years of plowing behind a mule. With no light to bounce off it, the vase sat dull and uninspired on the table beside the couch. So many of the descendants of slaves had done well in Washington, for themselves and for the flesh of their flesh, but his own son had failed as a father, the first to do so in a long, long line of good and righteous fathers. “Yes, Ma’am, I’m talkin bout your Noah, father to your children. I laid with him.” Could a man, even one worshipped by his children, be considered a good father if he was an adulterer and had hurt the mother of his children? Had he in fact been the first in that line to fail and thus doomed his own son?

Months before their granddaughter came to them, they had gone to Kenya. Oh, but he had loved Kenya! What would seeing the rest of the world have done for him? After Maggie fell asleep that first night in Kenya, he had stood in his robe at the hotel window for a long time, but all the sounds and smells of Nairobi couldn’t lull him to sleep. That was the way it was for most of their twelve nights there. But he had so adored Kenya. They had planned to see Africa and the world in their retirement. He knew now, though, that his two grandchildren, first Elsa and now Adam, would cost him the rest of Africa and the world.

The cab came to a stop at North Capitol Street. The traffic light was out again, and the city-government people had sent a policeman to do the work of the light. Noah turned his head and saw a black man with banana-yellow hair standing in the small crowd waiting at the corner. The man was bobbing his head to a tune that came through his headphones. Noah and the yellow-haired black man looked at each other, and after a second or so the man raised his hand to greet Noah. Noah slowly raised his hand. “You know him?” Maggie said. “I think I did once,” Noah said. “I don’t remember. I do know it ain’t long after ten o’clock in the morning and already he’s made twenty white people happy.”

He often felt a momentary dizziness with the high-blood-pressure pills he took after rising in the morning. Get the hard work done and over, like the extended exercises he had started with Elsa’s coming. There had been no dizziness this morning. Perhaps his body knew it might have to clank off to battle and had no time to waste on dizziness. Where had he gone wrong with Caleb? Was the woman the beginning and end of it all? To have failed with one child, with a boy, even. It did not matter that he had succeeded with three girls. Caleb cried out in somebody’s wilderness and he was crying Noah’s name. Perhaps that woman had knocked on the door of their lives and only God had heard her, and God from his Heaven had reached down and punished with the tip of one of his fingernails.

The taxi crossed into Northwest D.C. H Street seemed to have become blocked with potholes, and somehow, to avoid the potholes, the taxi ended up on Massachusetts Avenue, where the city-government people never failed to battle the pothole problem because the senators and congressmen went back and forth on that street to Capitol Hill. At Seventh Street they turned left. Farther down the street was Lansburgh, a once-upon-a-time department store that white people in the past few years had made into a building of expensive apartments. His father had bought him a blue, fifteen-dollar suit at Lansburgh when he was thirteen. He was wearing a suit now, as was often the case with men of a certain age, from a certain age, black men who had grown up comfortable with such attire because their fathers and grandfathers had done it that way. They wore suits out into the world the way knights had worn armor; they wore suits even to baseball games and to shoeshine jobs. Elsa, his granddaughter, had cried to see him leave that morning. She had a good vocabulary for a three-year-old who had been so long around the city-government people and their foster families, but she could not say “Grandpa.” “Grandma” was no trouble. She had begun to cry as soon as she saw him put on his tie, one that his own father had worn. He had picked her up and her teary face had fallen into the crook of his neck.

Before the cab turned back onto H Street, Noah asked his wife, "What do you think he eats?"

"Little-boy food," Maggie said, and tapped the knobby knee of a man who could do a hundred deep knee bends.

The city-government people made a show of putting their offices all about the city. "We Are Where You Are," their signs proclaimed. The building in Chinatown at 622 H had only five stories, though a city-government woman in another part of the city had told Noah on the telephone that they could find Adam on the eighth floor.

They found Adam on the fifth floor, where a man in front of the building smoking two cigarettes at once had told them "they keep all the boys." The piece of paper on the door said "824." The paper was flapping though there was no wind in the hall. The boy, their grandson, was sitting on an orange plastic chair beside a majestic desk, his back to them, his feet unmoving, a foot or so up from the floor. He was six years old, and they had last seen him when he was but seven days old, wrapped in one of the three blankets Maggie had bought for him at Hecht's. A hatted black policeman looking at a magazine with pictures of naked women sat at the big desk. He was facing them, and when he saw Maggie and Noah he pointed at them and Adam looked around the side of the chair. The policeman and the boy were alone in the large room filled with nothing but telephones and chairs and huge desks. The policeman had on headphones under his hat and there was a radio playing on his desk. When Noah came closer and the policeman took off his hat and headphones, Noah could hear that the music on the radio was different from the music seeping out of the headphones.

Adam got down from the chair and stood very close to it, his arms at his sides. His hands were empty, wide open, one finger twitching. There was something coming, his body seemed to say, and he had best face it head on. It was the middle of July, and the city-government people had dressed him in corduroy pants and a long-sleeved black shirt, which reminded Noah of gangsters in the movies. He was the son of Maggie and Noah's only son, and Elsa's brother, and anyone in the world who knew their son Caleb could see that. Caleb—along with Adam's mother, Tamara—had disappeared out in that world and no one had seen them for hundreds upon hundreds of days. Maggie went to the boy and knelt, pulled him to her. There was a shopping bag near the boy and someone had pencilled his name on it and that someone had misspelled it. There was nothing else with him, and it was the nothing else that made Maggie pull him closer. At six, Caleb Robinson had had a trunk full of toys, a teacher mother, three sisters who treated him like a prince, a father who commanded a good wage because even blindfolded he could repair any car. Maggie continued to hold the boy and Adam's arms stayed at his sides.

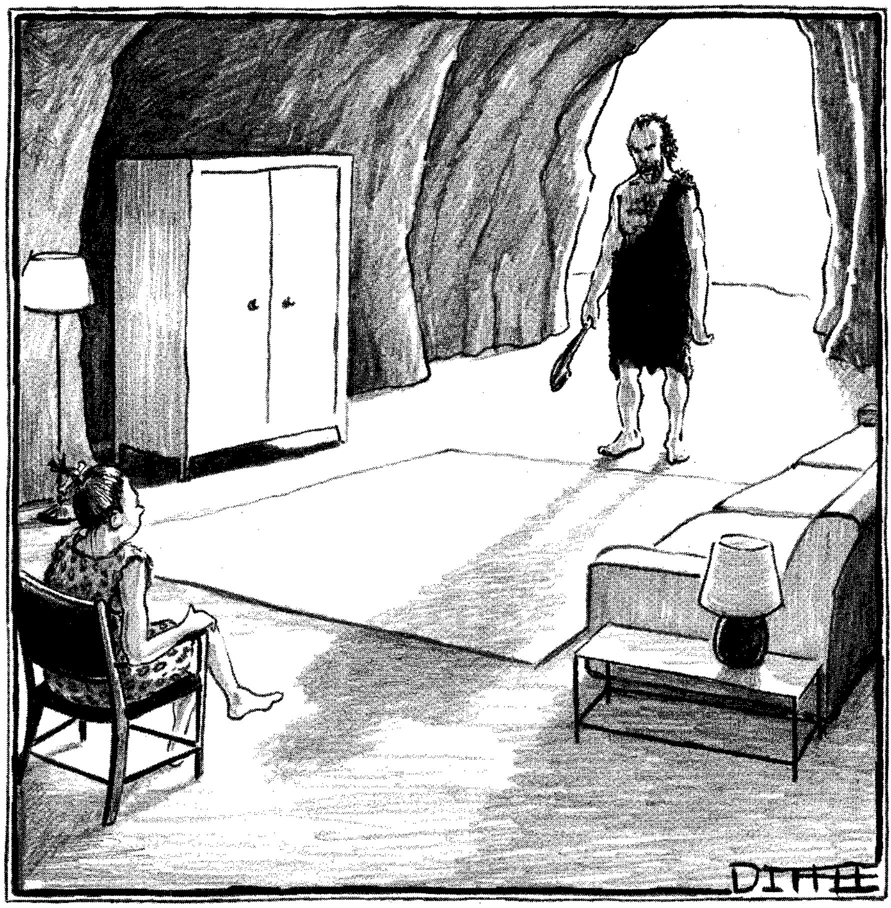
"You know who I am?" she asked him, pulling back a bit and then kissing him.

"Yes," he said, but that was not true. A yes was always easier, safer, than a no. The no's were always trouble for some reason, and the boy was sick and tired of trouble.

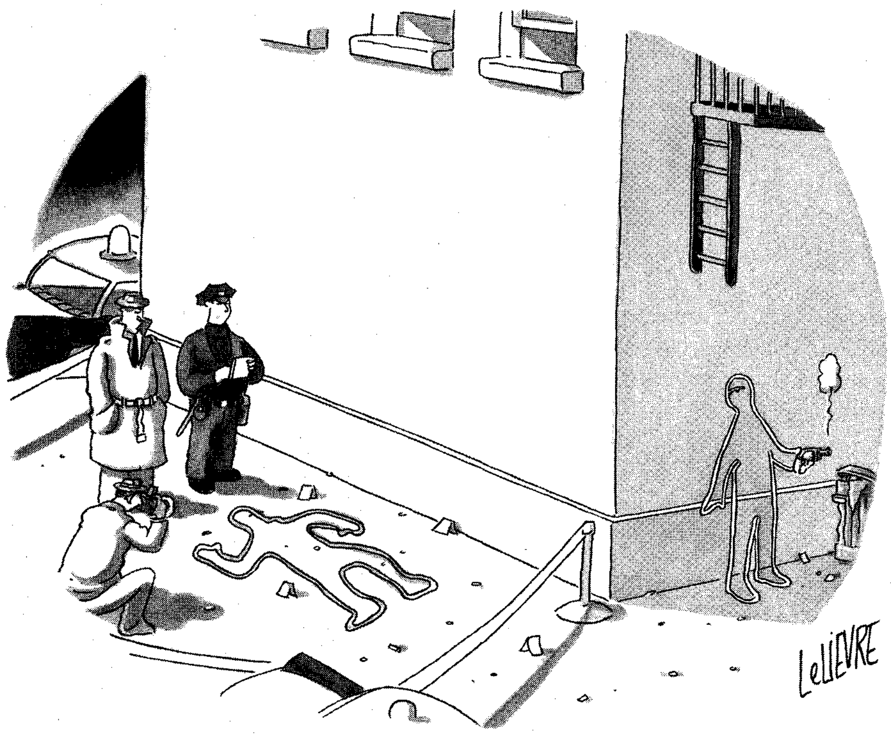
"I'm your grandmother and I'm taking you home for good."

Adam looked up at Noah, who smiled down and cupped the boy's chin. "That's your grandfather. Forever and ever," Maggie said. Adam said, "Yes."

The policeman put down his magazine open to the page he was studying and stood up. He reached out his hand to Noah, but Noah ignored him and took up the handles of the shopping bag. When they learned that Adam was not with his mother's people, they had paid five hundred dollars to a man who, though on the D.C. payroll, spent half his workdays as a private detective. "I'll find that boy," he had assured them, but he had never gone looking. Three months ago, the city-government people called out of the blue to say they had their grandson, "one Andy Robinson of an unknown age." But when Maggie and Noah went to the Southeast address to pick him up the city-government people did not have him. They lined up five teen-age boys for the couple, but none of the boys would answer to the name Adam, despite all the pleading from the city-government



"Whoa, someone's been doing some gathering."



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woman. "That ain't me. How many times I gotta tell ya, lady? That just ain't me," the smallest of the five kept insisting. Adam had stayed lost until the city-government people called again, two days ago, at four on a rainy Sunday morning. "Why you call so early?" Noah asked. "I got nothin better to do, Mister."

They took the stairs, because the elevators refused to go down when there were people in them. Outside, Noah rolled up the boy's sleeves and pants legs and Maggie held tight to Adam's hand. He did not turn his head to look left or right but stared only at where he was going. It was a busy street, H, and yet he seemed to have willed himself not to be curious about what was going on.

"You hungry, Adam?" Noah said.

Adam said yes. The people he had come upon in and out of the city government had taught him that they could not hear him shaking his head. Shaking or nodding the head was as bad as a no to them. And yes was preferred, not yeah. "Good black children never say 'yeah.' You ain't back down on some slavery plantation, boy."

"You like Chinese food?" Noah said, looking up and down H at all the restaurants.

"Yes."

Noah and Maggie looked at each other. "Oh," Noah said. "You like their corned beef and cabbage, huh?"

"Yes."

"We'd better find a McDonald's or something," Maggie said. "I think he'd drink hemlock if we put it before him."

They went to the McDonald's on E Street across from the fortress that was the F.B.I. headquarters. Maggie and Adam sat at a place near the window while Noah got the food. "I got five dollars," Adam said while they waited. Don't you know food cost money, boy? Don't you know that? Black children gotta learn the value of money.

"Oh?" Maggie said. "You're rich." He looked puzzled and said, "I got it from a lady who used to be my mother." Sometimes they liked the truth.

"Tamara? You got it from Tamara?" Wherever his mother was, she was not with Caleb. The grapevine had told Maggie that Tamara and Caleb had come to despise each other toward the end, not long before Elsa was born. Dope fiends, Noah began calling them. But worse than that, he continued, they were bad parents who had flung their flesh and blood to the winds. Root, little pig, or die. "You got the money from Tamara?"

"No," Adam said softly. "The other lady who was my mother. Miss Joyce. She wasn't even my mother no more and she gave me five dollars. I had baths with millions of bubbles. She gave me five dollars when Miss Billie was my mother. Miss Billie hit this man in the head with a fryin pan and made blood pop out his head." Adam tapped the top of his head several times with his knuckles. "He fell down and went to sleep. She hit him again." He continued tapping, then rested the hand on the table, the edge of which came midway up his chest. "Miss Joyce had a big house. Bubble time."

Noah came with the food. He sat across from them, his back to the window. He spread out napkins for a placemat for Adam, unwrapped a hamburger for the boy, and popped a straw through the top of a chocolate-milkshake container. Adam watched his grandfather's hands. Noah tore open the cardboard box with the French fries sticking out and squirted little packets of ketchup over them. It was nearing noon and the sun was high and they were shaded where they sat.

Adam put his hands in his lap. There had been one city-government mother who made him and the rest of those at her table say a five-minute prayer to Jehovah Our Loving Master before and after meals. "Eat, boy, eat," Noah said. "There's plenty more where that come from." Adam ate. Each time someone came near them he leaned forward, hunched over his food, and when the person had passed he sat up straight again.

Noah ate little chunks of chicken. "Why'd you get that?" Maggie said. "The fish would have been better for you."

"I read in the paper where the fish was worse. Somethin bout how they make it up, what they put in it. And all that sauce. With chicken I kinda know what I'm gettin. You have to do a lot to a chicken after you wring his neck before you turn it into a mystery meat." He looked at Adam. "Right?"

"Yes."

"He's rich," Maggie said. "He's got five whole dollars. His mother gave it to him." She looked hard at Noah to make certain he got what she meant. "Not Tamara. Miss Joyce."

"I got it in my shoe."

"Don't tell people where you got your valuables, baby," Noah said. "It's O.K. with us. But don't tell other people, baby."

Maggie put down her hamburger. "You do know," she said to Adam,

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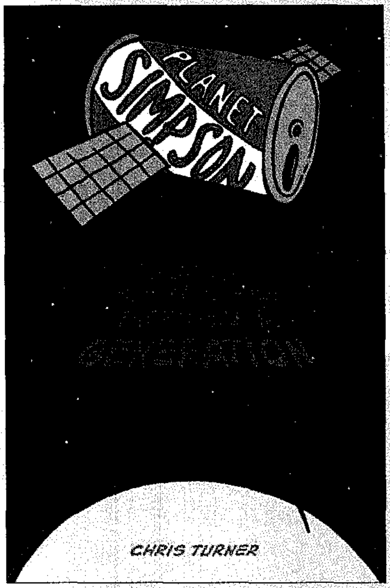
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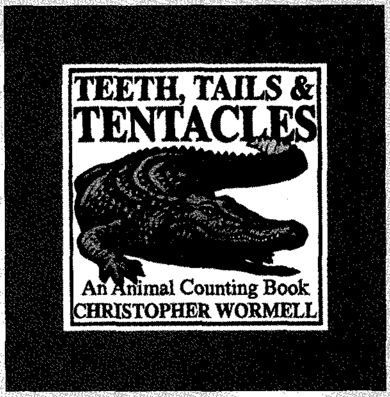
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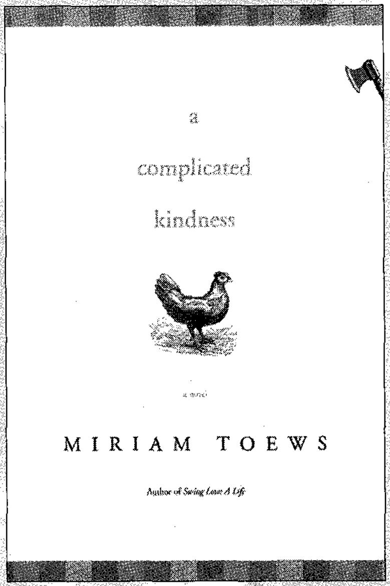
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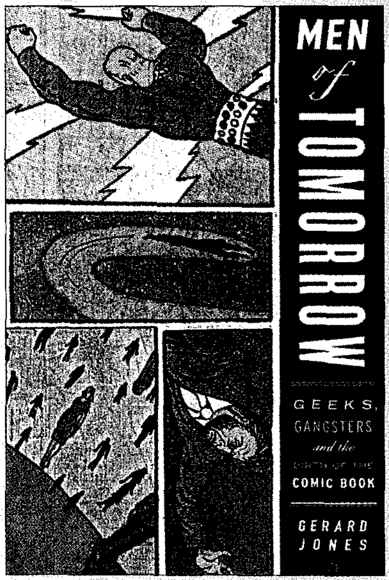
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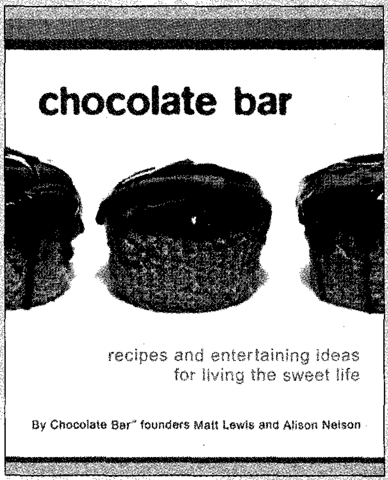
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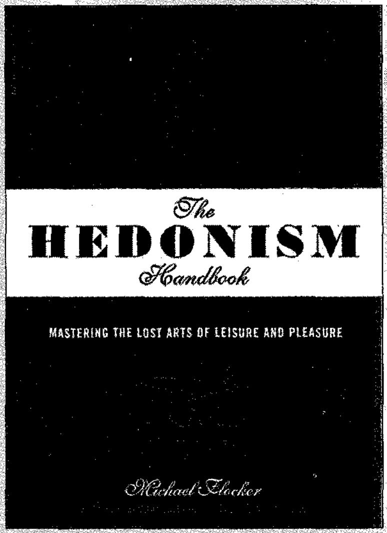
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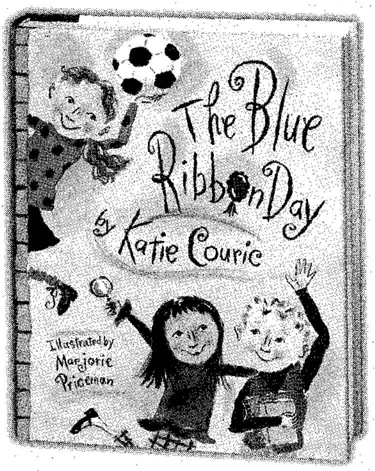

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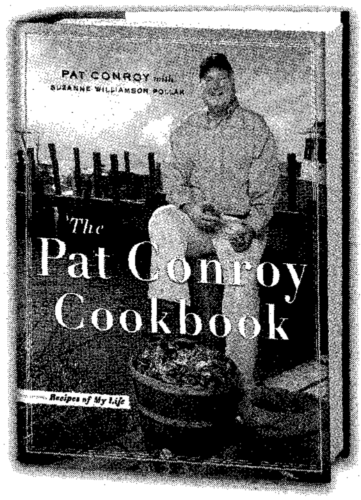

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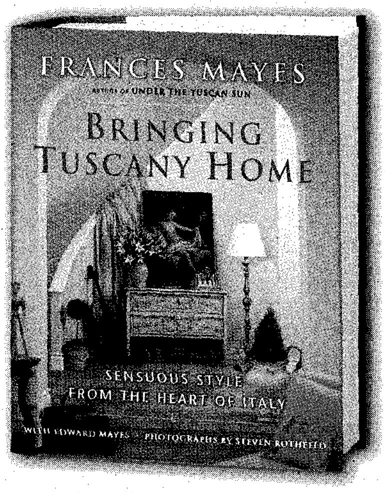

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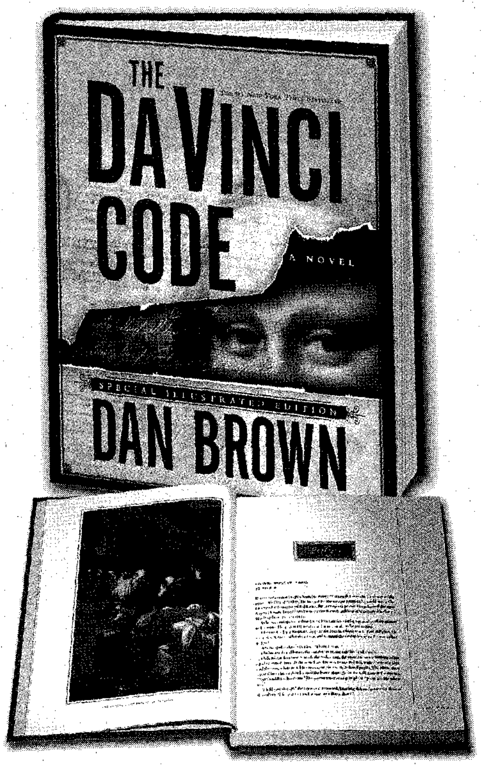

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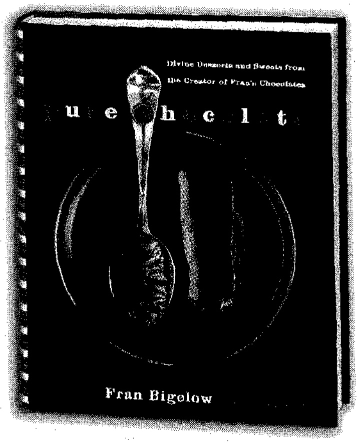

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“that you are coming home with us?”

“Home to Mama Wilson?” He stopped eating. “Goin home?”

“No, to our place,” Noah said. “You live with us now. We're your people, we're your family.” Noah pointed at Maggie and then at his own chest. Just a week before, a retired friend of Noah's had got on his boat and sailed off with his fourth wife around the world. A black man and woman on the wide blue sea.

Adam resumed eating, but they could tell that whatever joy he had found in the food was now gone. “Yes,” he said after a bit. “Yes, Ma'am” or “Yes, sir” was disallowed more times than allowed. People sometimes thought a “ma'am” or a “sir” made them seem old. “Dontcha put me in my grave before I'm ready,” one city-government man had warned him. “I just won't have livin in my grave before the good Lord calls me.”

Their granddaughter, Elsa, stood tiny and eager when Maggie opened the door. She ran and grabbed Maggie's leg, then she put her arms around Adam and reached up and kissed his cheek, though she had never laid eyes on him a day in her life. Adam, having known some good children in his life, giggled. Finally, Elsa went to Noah and he picked her up with an arm that could do seventy-five push-ups, dropping Adam's shopping bag just inside the door. Elsa kissed his mouth.

“I thought she'd have a conniption fit waitin for yall,” said Mrs. Battle, a neighbor from downstairs. “It was ‘Grandma’ this and ‘Grandma’ that. She kept pointin at that picture of yall on the side table. But she settled down after a while. If you start tellin a child how to pick cotton, they go quiet. How you go up this row and down that row, pickin them little bugs outa your cup of water. Talkin bout pickin cotton is like a mother's lullaby. A child will calm down and drift along.”

Noah said nothing. Maggie introduced her to Adam. “A full house now, huh?” Mrs. Battle said. “My, my.” She had nine grandchildren and three great-grands, but they all went home in the evening after visiting. And if she allowed one to stay the night—for she loved all of them more than she let on—the child's parents had to come get him or her before noon or she would put the child in a cab bound for home. Before the taxi arrived for the pickup, she would pin an enveloped note to the child's blouse or shirt: “I raised one set and I don't plan on raisin another.”

Adam watched Mrs. Battle leave and then stood beside his shopping bag. It was all wrong because it was all so perfect. The way the carpet soothed his feet even with his tennis shoes on. The table of many flowers in front of the window, a clean window with the ever so blue curtains fluttering in the wind from the machine that cooled everything. The thousand photographs of grownups and children who had more right to stand where he was standing, because they were family. The girl's doll sleeping on the floor against the couch, waiting for another go-round. He had known perfect before, but there had always been a tilt, and that tilt told him that this was home, however temporary: Music all the time, even in the middle of the night. A big dog gnawing at a chair leg and turning its head to eye him. Whatcha lookin at, boy? A finger in his face to emphasize a thousand rules. Mustard-and-ketchup sandwiches. Cigarette smoke curling around his nose before it dashed in. Even in Miss Joyce's big house there had been unlit corners that whispered, Stay away. The basement.

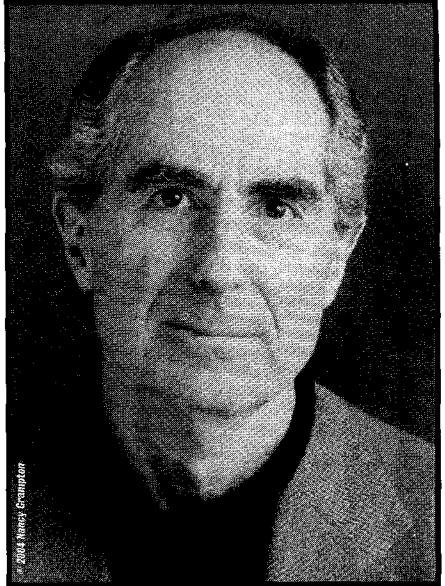
Whatever this was, it was not home in the way he had been taught. He put his fingers around the shopping bag's handles. “When I'm goin home?” he said at last in as submissive a tone as he could muster.

“What?” Noah said. He put Elsa down. Maggie was adjusting the thermostat. “You are home,” Noah said. Adam blinked but didn't release the handles. Noah reached out his hand to the boy and Adam took it, dragging the bag along. Noah led him into the first bedroom of the apartment. “That's gonna be your bed.” The man pointed to one of the twin beds on either side of a window adorned with a green curtain. The bedspread was beige and covered with cartoon people Adam remembered from a television in a city-government home in Northeast. “And that's your Teddy bear there, waitin for you to give him a name.” Adam had once seen a dog named Cecil tear open the stomach of a Teddy bear. The brown bear on this bed sat propped against two pillows, one on top of the other, and the bear's arms were wide open.

Elsa was now standing in the doorway.

“And here,” Noah said, leading him across the room to a chest of drawers. “These two drawers up here belong to

PHILIP ROTH



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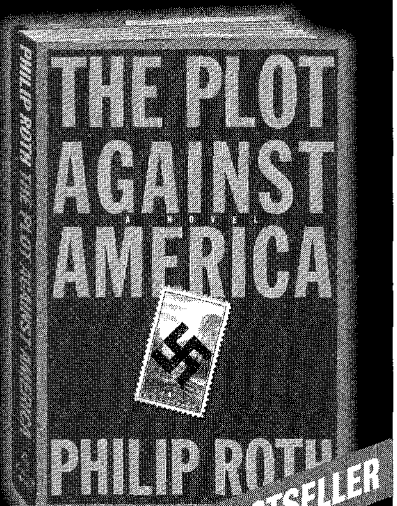
The now famous first sentence of THE PLOT AGAINST AMERICA:

“Fear presides over these memories, a perpetual fear...”



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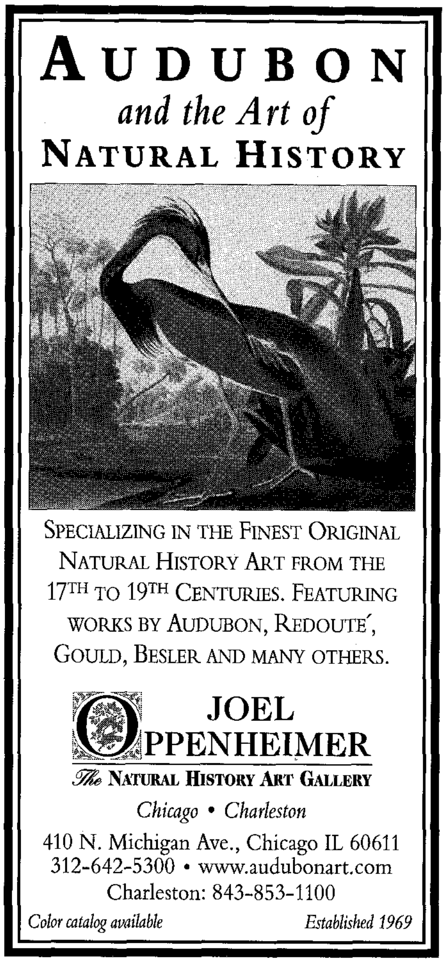
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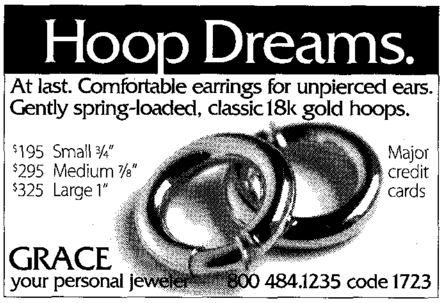
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you." He pulled out the drawers and picked Adam up to show him the shirts and pajamas and underwear in both drawers, the result of Maggie's quick trip downtown the day before. "And this here middle one you can share with Elsa for socks and whatnot. O.K.?" He pulled the drawer out and pointed to the boy's socks on the left side. "See?"

Adam said, "Yes."

"You do know that Elsa is your sister, don't you?"

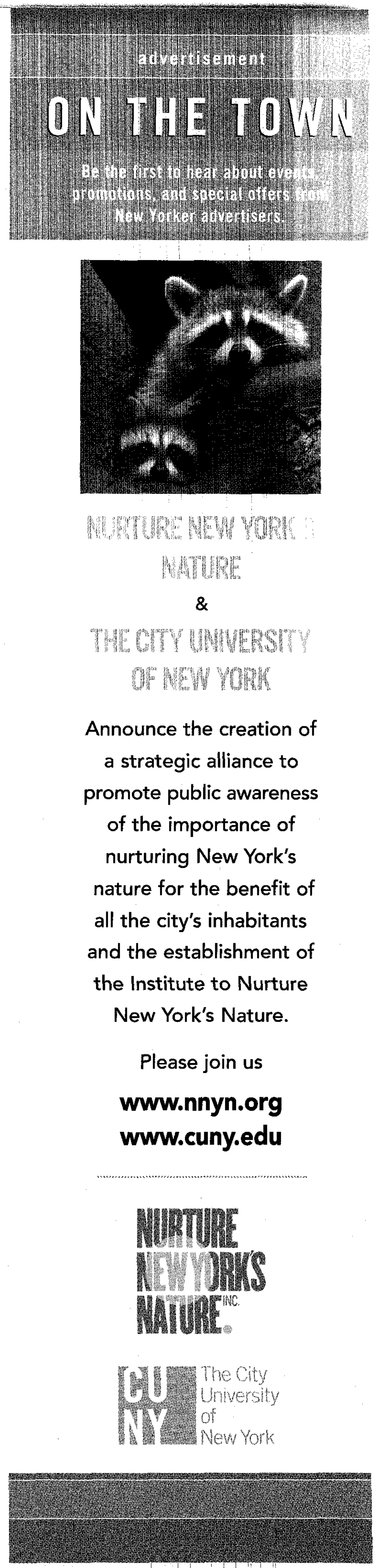
"Yes."

Noah noticed that the yeses were piling up and weren't amounting to even a speck of caring or understanding. He put the bag on the floor beside the bed and sat on the bed, taking Adam between his legs. "I know how bad this might be right now, but you'll see. It'll work out." Noah did not believe that. The second bank had yet to call back about cashing in one of his retirement funds, money that would have paid for a trip to China when they were seventy. "Can you trust me? Can you trust your grandma and me to do the right thing by you?" Noah opened his hands, made a bowl of them, and offered it to the boy. Adam put one of his hands into the bowl. Elsa came up to them, standing very close to Adam. She said nothing, but watched the man and the boy. Adam looked at her and she put her face hard against his arm. He remembered her from somewhere, and as he kept his hand in his grandfather's he thought that if he could remember her he would be home again, at Mama Wilson's, and everything would be jim-dandy.

THURSDAY

For five weeks, Noah had been tending a new, frail tree in front of their two-story apartment building. He took the children out that evening with his can of water. The tree box was now eight straight days without debris, a record. There was an oak about midway down the street, the 1500 block of Independence Avenue in Southeast. It was sturdy, maybe owing to the prayers of the three older women who lived in the house facing it. Across the street, down near Sixteenth, were the remnants of a catalpa that refused to die.

Noah handed the can to Adam. "Give it some," he told the boy, and Adam watered the tree. "Now let her." Adam gave the can to Elsa, who had trouble with it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and got most of the water on the sidewalk and in the gutter. Adam looked at Noah and Noah winked knowingly at him. Girls, Noah mouthed, and rolled his eyes.

His car, a year-old Toyota, was parked a few yards beyond the building. Noah opened the front passenger door and let Adam crawl into the driver's seat. He sat in the passenger seat with Elsa on his lap. He waited for the boy to pretend to drive, the way all boys did, the way Caleb did, but Adam just looked out the window. "Go on, take us somewhere," Noah said. Adam said, "Where?" "Anywhere you want," his grandfather said and took Adam's hands and placed them on the steering wheel. "Why don't you take us home?" "Home," Elsa said. Without a word, Adam moved his hands slowly about the wheel. Noah said, "That's what I'm talkin about." "Talkin bout," Elsa said.

"You been in a airplane?" Adam said, not looking at his grandfather and still moving his hands on the wheel.

"Yeah," Noah said. "A whole lotta times. You been in one?"

Adam did not answer.

"We'll take you up in one. We'll go see your Aunt Charlene, in Chicago. Surprise her before she comes to see us. We'll drive to Baltimore to see your Aunt Laverne and your uncle and your cousins. And we'll go across the river to see your Aunt Imogene."

The boy put his hands in his lap and looked out the window. Jesus Christ, Noah thought. Now what did I say? What had done it, he wondered, talking about the airplane, Aunt Charlene, Chicago? "You ain't thinkin bout goin home again, are you?" Adam said nothing. Noah took one of the boy's hands and placed it back on the wheel. "Drive us some more, Adam," he said. "Take us somewhere."

SATURDAY

While Noah did the dinner dishes, Maggie bathed the children. There were two quite noticeable scars on the boy's back, a superficial one of some two inches at his left shoulder and a more profound one of less than an inch down near the base of his spine. She did not yet have the courage to ask about them. "We have to fatten you up," she said, squeezing warm water from the washcloth over his back. "Make you as fat as a little piggy." He told her he knew a bath song, and he started singing a bunch of nonsense words. Elsa, her back to the spigot, joined in. Her back was unblemished.

Later, after the children had watched one of two dozen videos their youngest daughter, in Virginia, had sent, Noah sat between them on the couch and read from a fairy-tale book. He had not been a good reader until he met Maggie. After Mrs. Waters, he and school had not got along, he once told her. Not three weeks after Elsa came to them, he had sat her on his lap for a simple bedtime story. She pointed to magazines on the coffee table and he had to suffer through three copies of *Ebony* as she asked about every picture in them. Hundreds of pages and thousands of pictures. "What this?" she asked as she pointed to each picture. "Thas a doggy." She certainly knew a man and a dog and a woman when she saw them in her everyday life, but for some reason she needed him to make the connection between what was in her mind and the colorful pictures in the magazines. "What this?" "A truck." And she needed him to connect them over and over. He started cheating with the third magazine, turning five and ten pages at a time. "What this? What this?"

Adam fell asleep before the fairy tale had ended, leaned over against Noah's arm, his open mouth forming a very small O. His grandfather carried him to the bed where the Teddy bear was waiting. "He sleepin," Elsa said as Noah went out of the room. "Now you," Maggie said, picking the girl up.

On the couch, Noah put his arm around Maggie. "I don't want no more hanky-panky with my daughter," her father had said to Noah after he had been exiled because of the Atlas Theatre kiss. Her father had guided fifteen-year-old Noah by the neck around to the side of the house. An ancient elm straddled the properties of Maggie's family and the people next door. "I can't help that Maggie wants to see you, boy, but I can help how many of your teeth I knock outa your head." The elms had not fared well in other cities, Noah had heard, but all the ones he had seen in Washington had been thriving. "Open your mouth, boy. Open it wide. Thas one I'll get. And them two teeth over there, I'll knock them out, too." He had eulogized his father-in-law, named his son after him. "This is the saddest day of my life,

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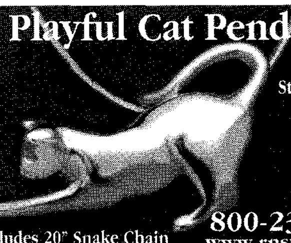
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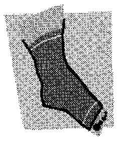
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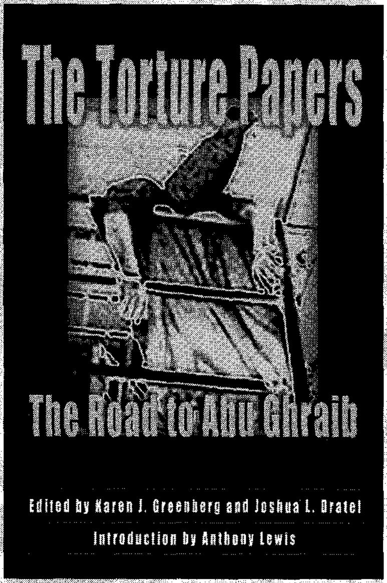

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While I was studying the copper cistern
and the silver goblet, a soup tureen
with a cat stalking a partridge and hare,

you were gulping down the morning light
and moving from the bedstand to the bureau,
from the shuttered window to the open door.

While I was taking my time over a pristine jar
of apricots and a basket of wild strawberries—
a pyramid leaning toward a faceted glass—

you were sitting at a low breakfast table
and eating a soft-boiled egg—just one—
from a tiny, hesitant, glittering spoon.

While I was absorbed in a duck hanging
by one leg and a hare with a powder flask
and a game bag, which you wanted me to see,

you were lying on the living-room couch
for a nap, one of your last, next to
a white porcelain vase with two carnations.

I wish I could have stood there with you
in front of Chardin's last self-portrait,
exclaiming over his turban with a bow

and the red splash of his pastel crayon—
a new medium—which he used, dearest,
to defy death on a sheet of blue paper.

—*Edward Hirsch*

cause I come here to bury one a my fathers," Noah had said in that church, with a thousand people looking on.

"You want some more cake?" Maggie said.

"Naw, I'm done for the night." He squeezed her shoulder. "Want some TV?" He had struggled on through his last year of high school, hoping that that would impress her father.

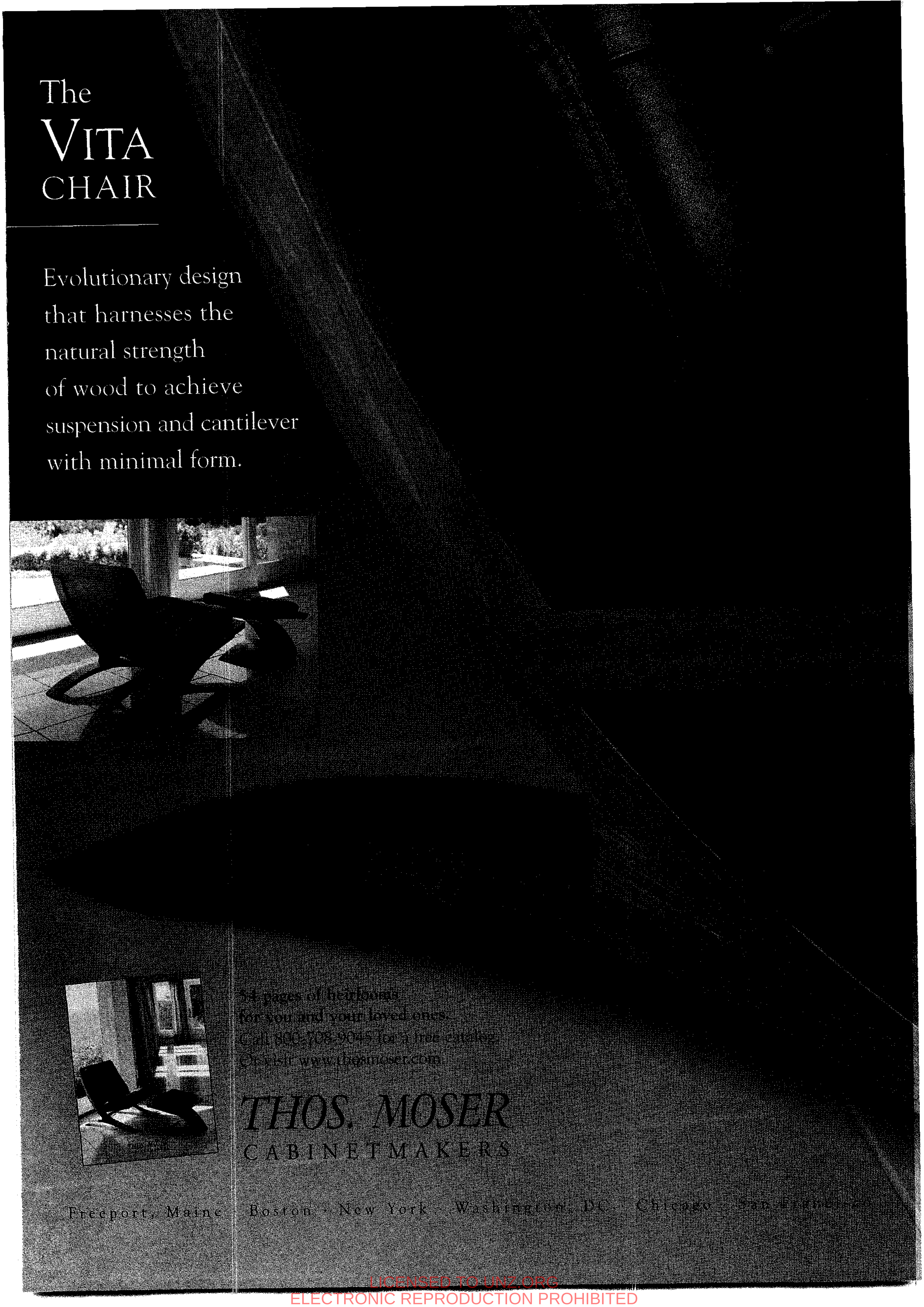
"What's on?" Maggie asked. She had a Ph.D. His three daughters had four Ph.D.s and an M.D. among them. He and Caleb had only high-school diplomas. "What am I gonna do with you, Noah?" her father had said the day Noah asked to marry Maggie. Falling acorns had a way of sounding to an adulterer like the footsteps of a father-in-law.

"Let me turn it back on and see." He reached for the remote control, but she pulled his arm back.

"Let it come on by magic," she said. "Let's see it come on by magic." In Rome they had turned on the television, but none of it made sense because they did not know the language. It rained a lot in Paris their first days there and they would sleep until eleven or so in the morning. "I will see you again, Kenya," he had said, buckling his airplane seat belt. "I'll see you before the by-and-by."

MONDAY

In the newspaper's obituaries, he saw, for the hundredth time, a name that he thought could be that of the woman, but he could not be certain, because he had long ago forgotten her name. They, he



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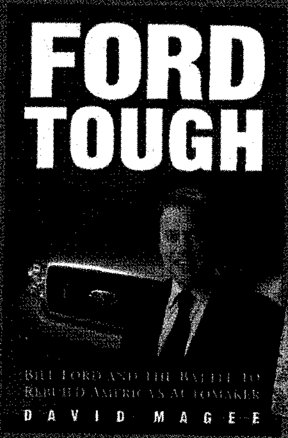
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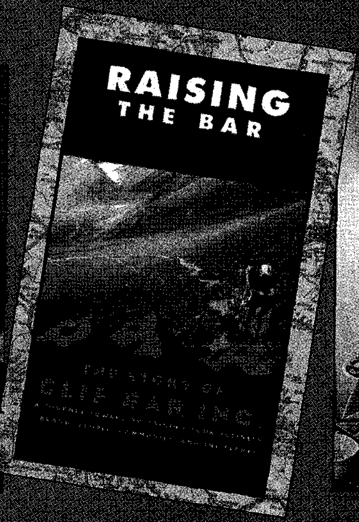
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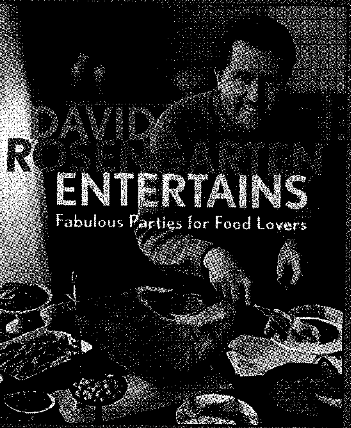
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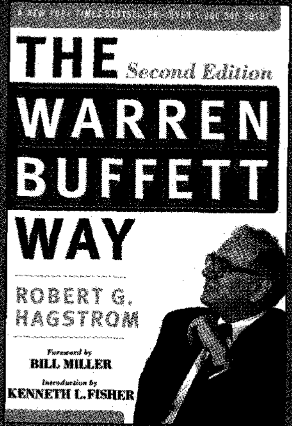
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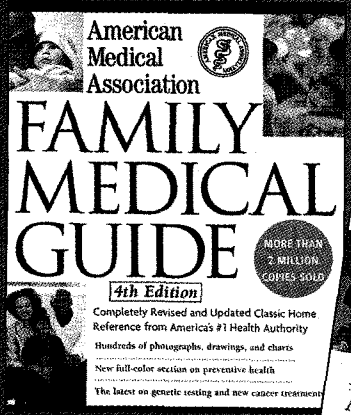
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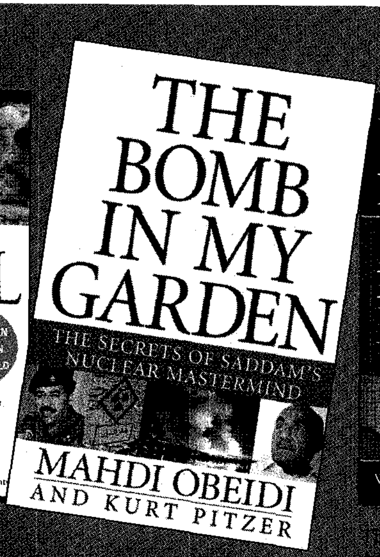
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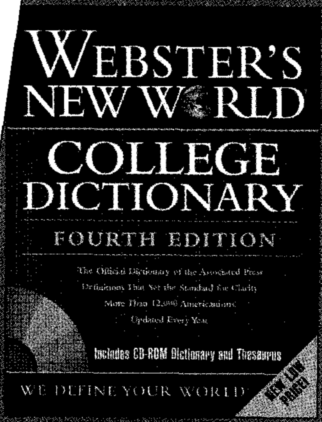
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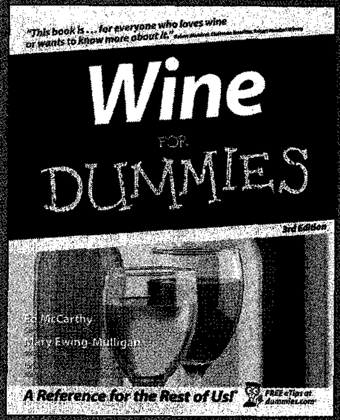
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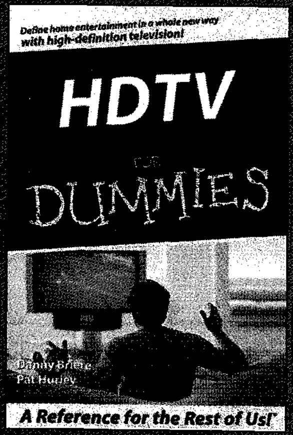
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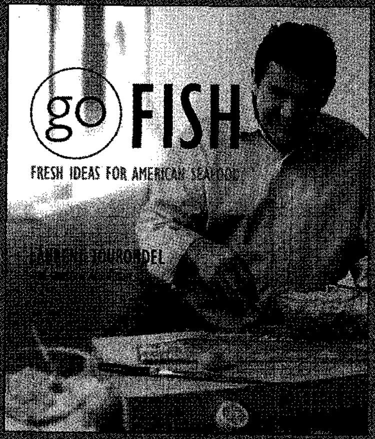
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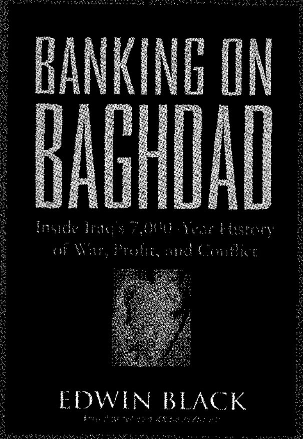
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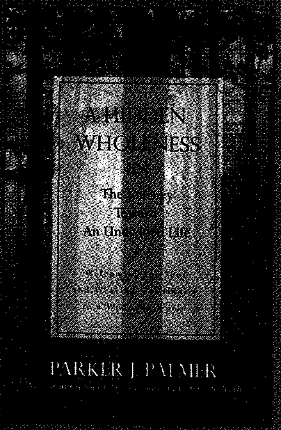
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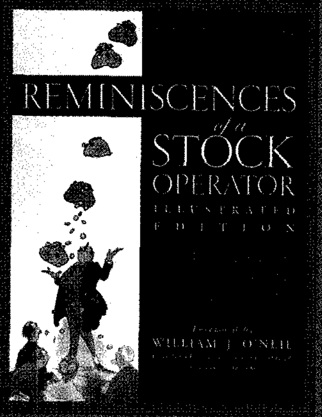
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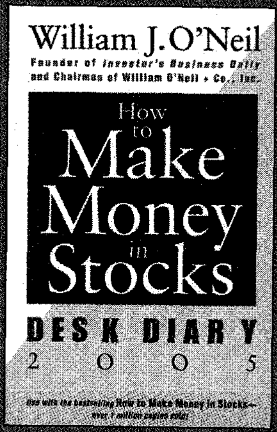
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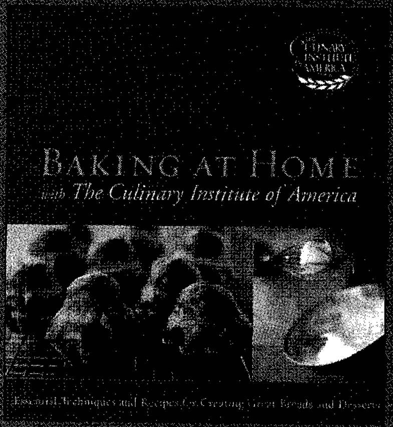
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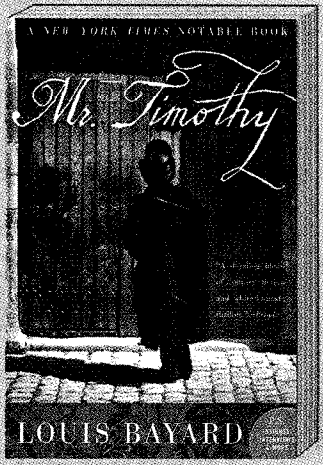
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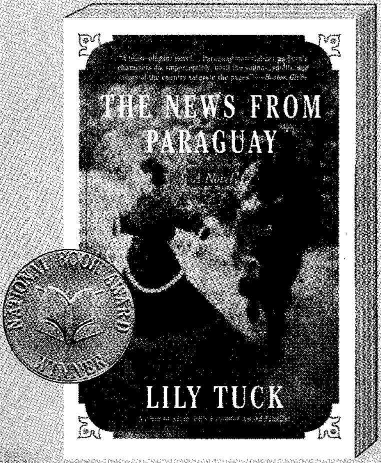
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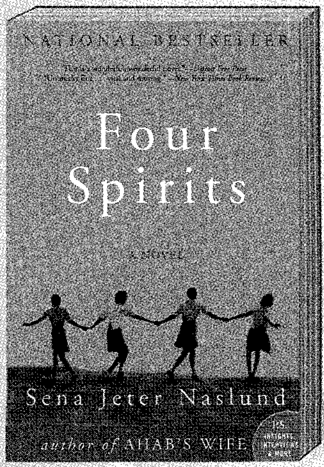
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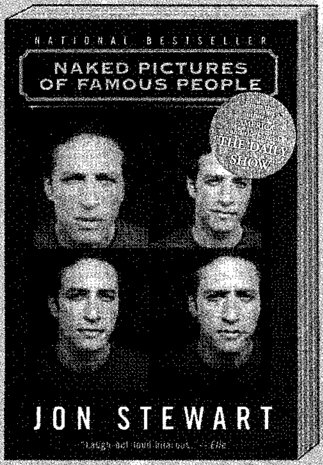
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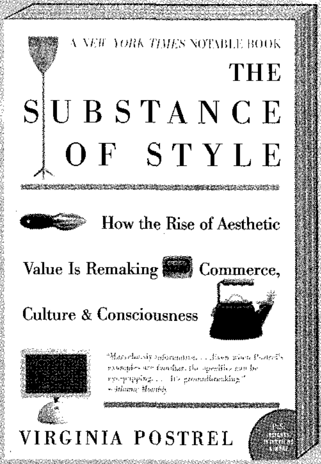
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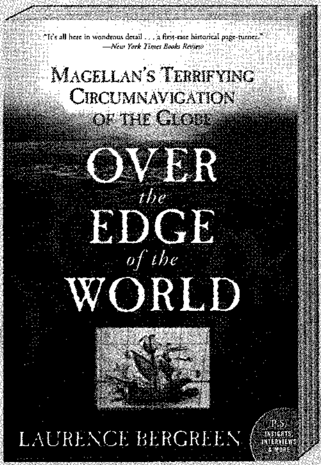
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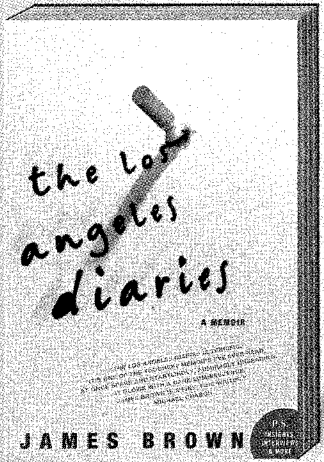
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and the woman, had started what they had nearly a year before Maggie became pregnant with Caleb. "What's the use a eatin your lunch in this dirty old garage?" the woman said to him the day she brought her broken-down Chevy in and saw him sitting on a stool eating a tuna-salad sandwich that Maggie had made. Maggie's coffee still hot in the thermos. "I got a nice table and chair just waitin to be used." Maggie had asked him once what he thought of having just one woman for the rest of his life, and he had innocently thrown it back at her and asked what she thought of having but one man for the rest of hers. She said she was fine with that. Just fine, thank you very much. That was when they had had only one child, and it was nighttime when she asked and right then that one baby girl started crying for more of everything and he never got to answer her and she never asked the question again. One baby, two babies, three babies . . . He waited two days after the woman's offer of the chair and table and got her address from the work order, told his fellow-workers, Big Tiny and the rest, he was taking lunch in the park. Big Tiny said, "Dontcha get into any fights with them sassy trees in that park, y'hear?" "I knowed it was you even before I opened the door," the woman said after his two knocks—knocks so soft they wouldn't have awoken a sleeping baby. It was a few days after Palm Sunday and she had palms sticking out between her bedroom mirror and the wall. The wind came through the window and disturbed the palms, and when the wind stopped, the palms on the bottom were the first to come to rest. The top ones took a while, as they held on to the memory of wind for a longer time. "I'm Catholic," the woman said when Maggie was five months pregnant with Caleb. "Catholic on my mother's side. Pure dee Catholic. On my father's, I'm straight up and down Baptist."

At home, his daughters continued to worship him, and his wife grew big with Caleb. When Caleb was two weeks old, Noah told the woman he would not ever come back. The woman shrugged. "Easy come, easy go. A tree has more leaves than I can count. Why cry bout just one leaf fallin away?" He came back before Caleb was two years old and would always believe that it was the return that had doomed him and his boy. God told the Israelites that he would punish men who stole grapes by setting their children's teeth on edge. Oh, that God. God and his long, punishing fingernails . . . Before Caleb was two and a half, Noah said goodbye to the woman again. Caleb took sick the night of that goodbye. In the ambulance, he held Caleb as the boy shivered and shook, and all the way to the hospital Noah thought his boy would be fine if only the siren would hush and give them some peace. "Can't you stop that noise?" he said to the driver. "That noise tells folks your son is somebody important, Mister," the woman said.

WEDNESDAY

For many nights after Adam's arrival, Noah had managed to get some three hours of sleep. But Tuesday night he slept for no more than two hours. After lying with his eyes open for an hour and trying to will himself back to sleep, he got up at about two and went quietly out of the room. Maggie had always been able to fall asleep within five minutes of putting her head on the pillow. A woman who had never committed adultery. He stood in the little hallway until his eyes adjusted to the dark.

At the door of the children's room he heard nothing, but he felt that Adam was awake.

He took one step into the room and said, "Adam?"

"Yes?"

"You should be sleepin." Adam was sitting up in the bed. "You need a lotta sleep."

"Yes."

"Then why don't you try to get some?" Adam lay down. The man stood for more than fifteen minutes, but the boy did not go to sleep. The air-conditioning began to chill Noah and he finally went to the couch and sat and covered himself with a throw his daughter Laverne had given him for his sixty-fifth birthday. Maggie had been taking Elsa to church each Sunday, and she was planning to take Adam again that Sunday. "It won't hurt them," she had told her husband. Noah had not been to church in three years. Would a grandfather going to church give a grandson just a little peace at night? Would God let him live until the children were grown? Could God forgive

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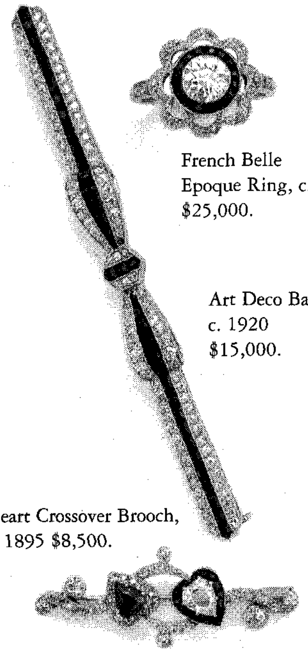

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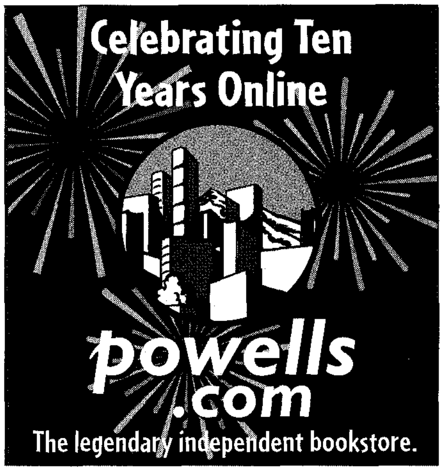

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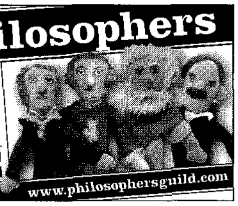

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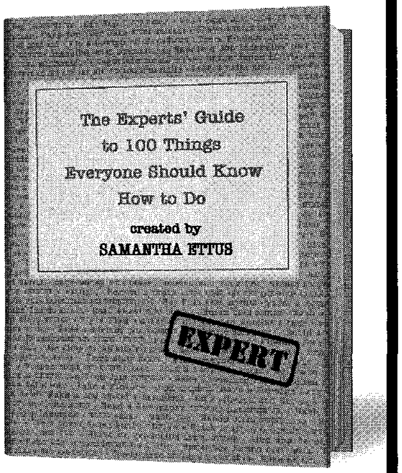

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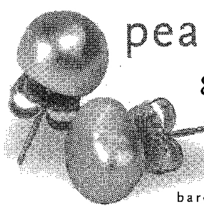
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the adultery? Could God manage that?

About three he put his feet up on the couch. At four he went to the refrigerator and got a slice of cheese, the throw around his shoulders. At four-thirty he went in and saw that Adam was asleep. At five he went back for two more slices of cheese and folded them and dipped them into the mayonnaise jar. At a quarter to six the deliveryman dropped the newspaper at his door and Noah opened the door and stood at the threshold with the newspaper in his hand and looked at the metal stairs that led up to the roof. Noah had a lodge brother who seemed to sin every day of his life and nothing bad had ever happened to him. He had died at eighty-five in his sleep beside his seventh wife, in a big house, with his thirteenth child, an infant, sleeping nearby. Noah had been a pallbearer at his funeral. He read the headlines on the front page and heard someone downstairs drop a pan. It was hard thinking about God playing favorites all the time. At the threshold he read the obituaries.

TUESDAY

Noah rose about six-thirty and yawned as he took in the Washington *Post*. He had been retired three years, as had Maggie. Coffee with the newspaper alone in the morning kitchen was one thing he looked forward to. He wasn't much for sports, just liked to read the front and Metro sections to see what bad things the world had done to people. The door to the children's room was cracked, and as soon as he opened it all the way he saw Adam standing before him, holding the shopping bag. The boy was a heartbreaking sight. He still had on the pajama top, but he was wearing the corduroy pants and tennis shoes of that first day. Noah could see that the shoelaces weren't properly tied. Adam had an odd alertness about him, as if he had been standing there all night, just waiting for someone to push open the door. "When I'm goin home?" the boy said. He put a little more pep in the words than he had the day before.

"You tryin to rile me this early in the mornin, boy? I told you yesterday that you were already home. Thas your room, thas your ceiling, thas your closet, thas your sister, thas your floor. This your grandfather. All yours."

Adam looked about, convinced of nothing. Elsa was sleeping.

"Put down that bag." Noah wanted to shout, thinking that loud words might sink in better than soft ones. "Put it down right now. Put down that bag, I say, and come get some breakfast."

Adam let go of the bag's handles.

"Where your slippers at?" Noah said. Adam looked over to the bed. The slippers were resting neatly together on the floor at the side of the bed. There had been a little boy's attempt to make the bed and the thing was all lumpy. "Put on them slippers. A man can't enjoy breakfast in his street shoes." Adam changed and came back to stand before his grandfather. "Come on and les wash up." Elsa slept on.

He buttered a piece of toast for Adam and set a bowl of Cheerios before him. "Your daddy liked Wheaties," Noah said, sitting across from Adam and spooning sugar into his coffee. "We bought you some Wheaties just in case."

"The yellow box is nice," Adam said, pointing to the Cheerios box.

"Well, don't pick a cereal cause of the box. A pretty box could be holdin poison. Get a cereal you like. You like Cheerios?"

"Yes."

"Tell me somethin—where is this home you keep talkin about? Whose house is this thas so good you don't want to be here?"

The boy looked at the space next to the plate with his half-eaten toast. "Mama Wilson," he said. "But I guess she already got some other boy for my bed." He put down the spoon.

"Sooner or later you're gonna have to learn to trust me and your grandmother. We won't take away your bed."

"I had a nice bed over her house," Adam said, finally looking at his grandfather. "She a good mama."

Noah said nothing. Was it too late to find Tamara's people and give him to them? Why couldn't Adam be more like Elsa and go along with the program? He had read in the newspaper where all kinds of orphans never got over what had happened to them. Once adopted, they threatened their new siblings and their new parents with death by stabbing. Death in the night. Adoptive parents put locks on their bedroom doors, they took turns staying awake and guarding the door. The children became teen-

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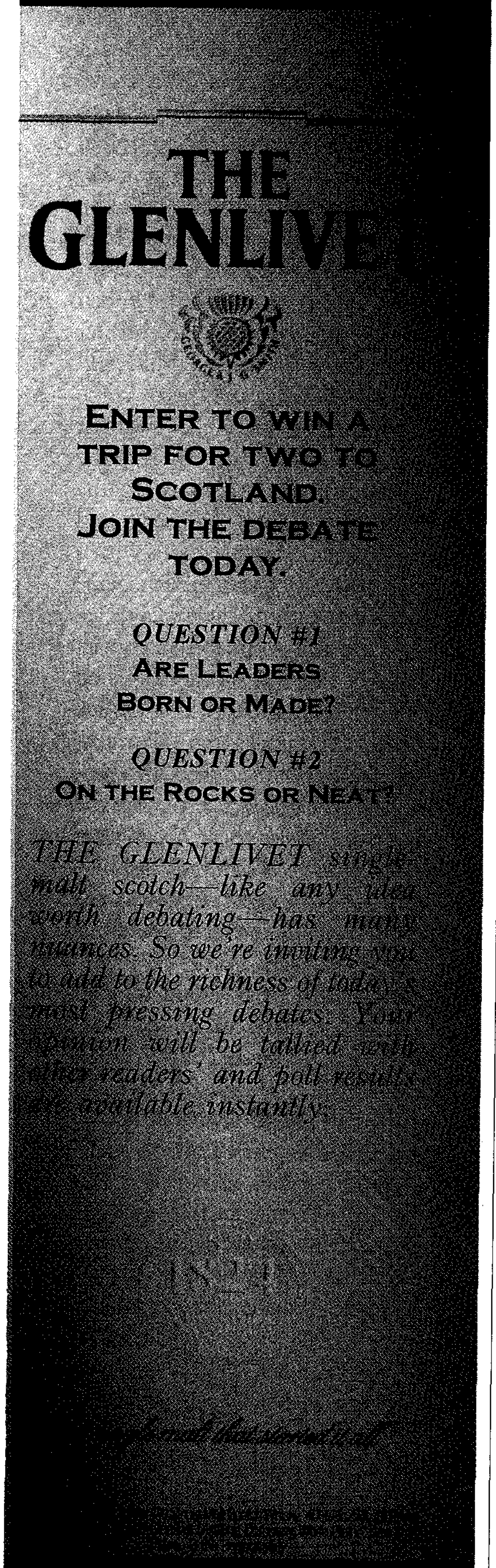

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age criminals, even murderers, and drifted off into their own kind of night, never to return to that good new home. In the newspaper, the parents said they still loved the children, but there was relief between the words. "Good riddance to bad rubbish," an old white woman Noah knew in South Carolina liked to say about bad people way over there in another county.

"It sleeps good," Adam said of the bed. "She givin it to some other boy right now." In the end, Noah said, "Eat," and pointed to the toast and the cereal. Adam followed his grandfather's hand as the finger pointed and as it retreated and picked up the coffee cup. When the hand was resting in his grandfather's lap, the boy picked up the toast.

FRIDAY

The man awoke after a half hour of sleep and sat up in bed, orienting himself. In two months he would be sixty-eight. He got to his exercises, managing seventy-seven pushups but only thirty sit-ups before something told him to stop. As his sweat dried, he pruned the bonsai tree he kept in a special compartment in one of the bedroom windows. The compartment allowed the tree to be in the room and then, with just a turn of its wooden platform, to be outside. And with the press of a button a transparent covering emerged from the side of the compartment to cover the tree outside. The bonsai was a gift from his youngest daughter, who lived in the suburbs of Virginia, where trees with all the life of plastic had been put up to decorate the new developments. Someone had warned him that bonsai trees in people's homes did not live very long, but his had gone on for more than six years and it had given him unimaginable pleasure. The tree was so small that he could cover it with both hands. A booklet that came with the tree said it had been "trained" for thirty-five years. He had waited the first two years for the tree to wither and die, but it went on and on. Now he believed that it could live forever. In the National Arboretum he and Maggie had seen bonsai trees that had been living—"trained"—for three hundred, four hundred, five hundred years. If them, why not his own?

After washing up, he changed from

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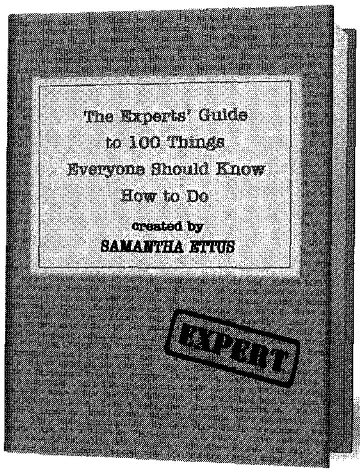

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his pajama top to a T-shirt. He peered long into the bathroom mirror, at his father's and his grandfather's face. His father had died at seventy-five and his grandfather had made it only to sixty-six. He turned his face this way and that to see if he wanted to shave right then. Last week Elsa had fallen in the playground and cried as if her world were falling apart. He decided to shave because his granddaughter liked smooth cheeks. He left the bathroom and stood just outside the children's room and listened to them playing. Adam was pretending to be a dog for Elsa. "If you give me a biscuit, I'll jump over here," he said. He barked. If only he could be like that all the time.

He found Maggie at the stove, singing. The coffee was waiting. He stood watching her. The newspaper was on the edge of the table. A man on the radio was telling him the news. The window was open and he could hear a man and a woman talking.

"Why you always so cheerful with all this?" he asked, and fanned his hand to indicate all that was wrong, including Adam.

She placed bacon on a plate covered with paper towels and put another towel over it. Then she danced over to him and did three slow twirls. "Because I have you," she said and twirled back over to the stove. "Don't you see, Noah, how easy it would be if you were married to you? Your days would be good. See me? Watch me. I'm standing on your shoulders." She raised herself up on the tips of her toes and looked over as if from the edge of a mountain. She called down into the valley from the mountain, "Nooooaah, thank you." She settled back on her feet, swaying her hips. "Two eggs or three?" She took an egg in each hand and danced over to him, with her hips still swaying. She kissed him. He put his arms around her and kissed her with such passion that one egg cracked in her hand and she had to place the other one on the newspaper before it, too, cracked.

They did not move. She rested her cheek against his chest. He had got lost on his way to the woman's place that first time. "I'll have to give you a map for the next time," she said.

"Two eggs, then," Maggie said. She leaned to the side and found the children watching them. "Hey," Elsa said. Noah did not move. Adam was holding Elsa's hand. "Hey yourself," Maggie said. Elsa pointed to the egg Maggie had crushed against the back of Noah's robe. "He's pretty messy that way," Maggie said to Elsa. Boys, her grandmother mouthed.

SUNDAY

In the newspaper he read about a mother across the Anacostia River whose eight-year-old son had disappeared. The police told her to go home, that the boy would find his way back. "He's not a runaway and he stays close to home," the mother told them. "He's a good son. He's a good student. Something must have happened to him." When the police refused to help, she and her neighbors looked for the boy but could not find him. Finally, with night coming on, a group of former convicts at the neighborhood halfway house—the Light at the End of the Tunnel—gathered to search for the boy. The men found the boy in a little piece of woods with a man who was holding him under a blanket. "I ain't doin nothin," the man was reported to have said as one former convict pulled the boy free and another punched the man in the mouth, knocking his jaw far off track. "This is all some big misunderstanding," the man said through a broken jaw before he was kicked once in the head and twice in the chest. "I can clear this whole mess up." That was Washington now, Noah thought, that was the world now—people forced to get criminals to do police work.

In the evening, the reverend, Colbert Prentiss, called to say he had missed Noah that morning at church. "Saw Maggie and the children," he began, "but I didn't see you." Noah and Colbert had grown up together, had first met at Stevens Elementary. Colbert had also been a pallbearer at Mrs. Waters's funeral.

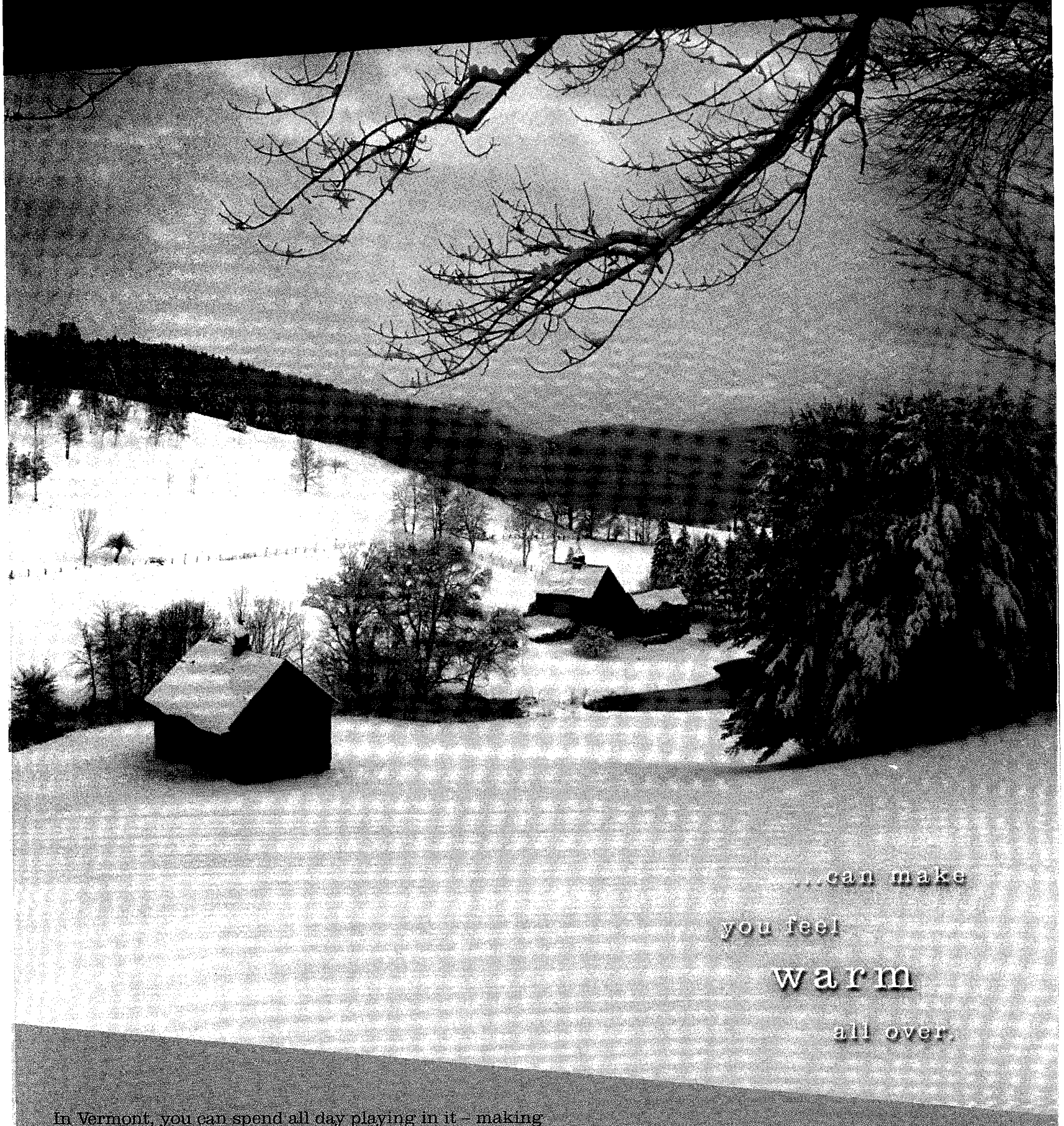
"I'll try to make it next time, Colbert."

"You better. I don't wanna have to stand up in the pulpit and talk about you."

TUESDAY

"Listen," Noah said, sitting on the floor, "why don't we get rid of this old shoppin bag?" Adam had just asked about going home and had a grip on the edge of the shopping bag. Noah gently shook the bag loose. It was already coming apart and wouldn't have survived a

A blanket of snow...



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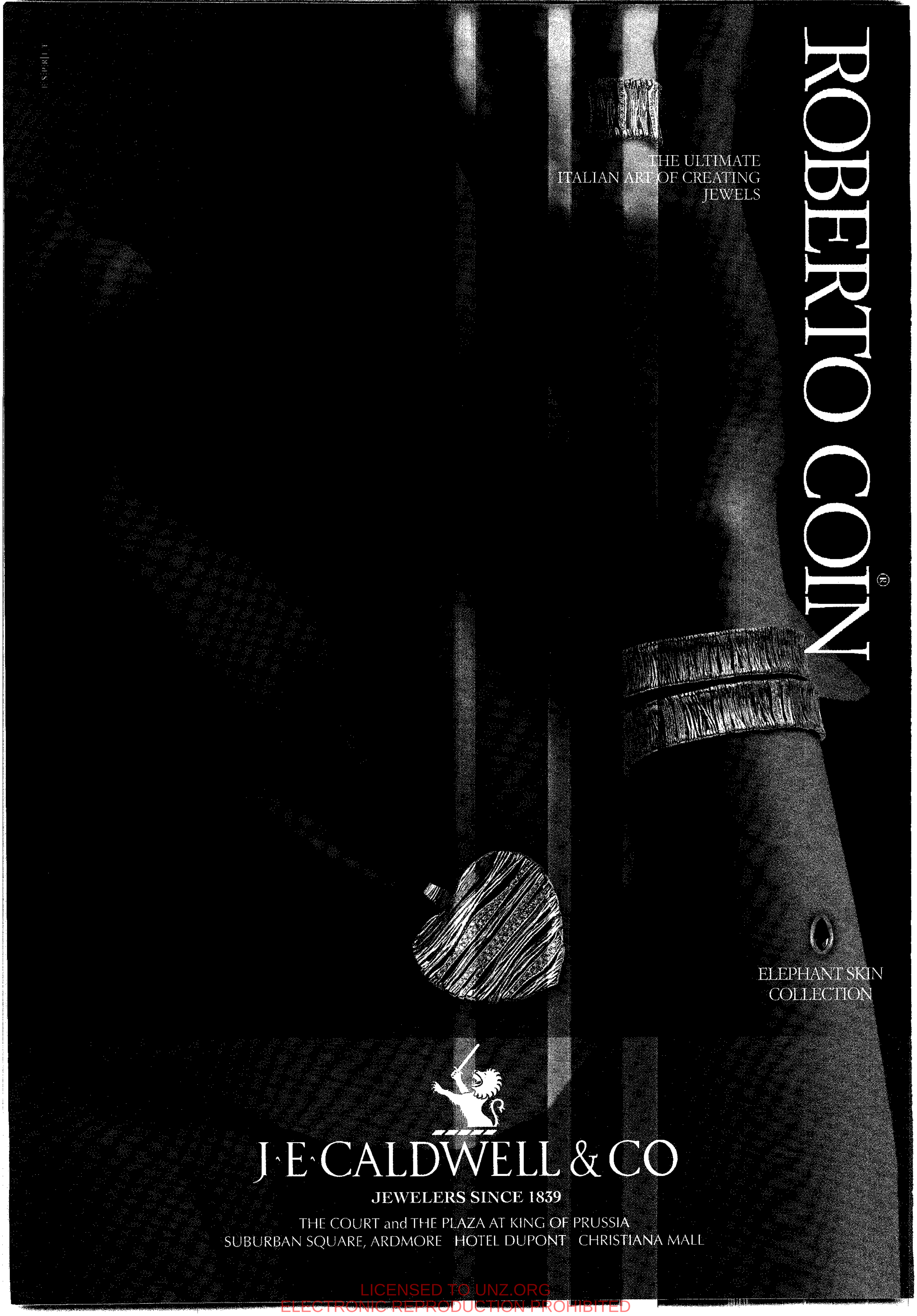
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trip beyond the apartment. Noah tore the bag down to the bottom right through Adam's name that someone had misspelled. And at the base of the bag he tore some more. Adam sat down, apprehensive. "I'll tell you what," Noah said. "You can have one of my suitcases if it makes things easier. If you need something for your things, I'll give you one a mine. I got one I took to Africa. Your bag only been to D.C. My suitcase been cross the sea and back again over and over."

There were still two shirts in the bag, both shirts at least two sizes too big for the boy. "Mama Wilson gave me this one," Adam said, picking up the blue shirt.

"Well," Noah said, taking the shirt and tossing it over his shoulder toward the door, "we don't need somebody else's shirt, do we?" Adam looked at the shirt. He wanted to go to it, pick it up.

"No," Adam said. He got out the white shirt. "They had this in the home. Another boy got it outa a big box. He got one and he gave me one. It's a church shirt." He reached into the muddle of things in the bag and pulled out a clip-on tie. He placed the tie over the front of the shirt lest Noah not know what he meant.

"I like the tie, so we'll keep that. But the shirt . . . the shirt."

"It's a church shirt," Adam said.

"All right, we'll keep it for like two years from now when you've grown into it." Noah threw it on top of the blue shirt. Adam said nothing. He was thinking of the phrase "two years from now." Noah tossed the tie up onto the chest of drawers.

Adam went into the bag. "I got this truck at Mama Joyce's," he said, and ran a green Matchbox truck back and forth a few inches over the floor. He shook the bag, spreading the things about. He was looking for something, but he couldn't find it. "She gave me three of em," he said. "I had two, but this big boy took one, said it was his. But I guess I lost the other one. They ran real good. See?" He gave the green truck to Noah and bade him move it about. Noah did. "Yeah," the man said. "It runs real good."

Adam pulled a tiny wooden box from the bag. He began tapping on its sides. "It's a secret box and it won't open if you don't do the secret." After the tapping, he raised the lid slowly, and inside was a desiccated June bug. "We caught this and Bobby put this lady's thread on his leg and we flew him. *Whoosh-whoosh!*" He picked the bug up. He offered it to Noah, but Noah shook his head. "It won't hurt you," Adam said, putting the bug back in the box. "It won't hurt. It's dead."

For the next half hour or so, the boy went through all the things he had acquired, and for each one he had a story. A broken yo-yo that had belonged to a big-toothed boy with broken eyeglasses. A snapshot of him in a group of children; he pointed to each child and gave their full names. None had a parent. A tiny book with just the New Testament. He opened it to where someone had written his name and the day he was given the book. There was even the time of day—11:05 A.M. He flipped a few pages. "I can read these words right there," he said, and moved his finger along the lines. "The book of the Jesus Christ, the son of David, the son of Moses, the son of Abraham, the son of God." He stopped. "Thas all the far we got." He set the book aside. He picked up two gray stones, hefting them in his right hand. "You can hurt somebody with these. You can make em leave you alone. Here," and he gave them to Noah and Noah hefted them and dropped them into his shirt pocket.

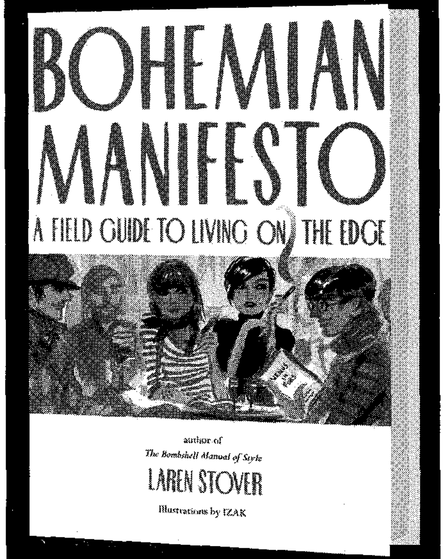
Adam went on and on, and in the end his grandfather said he would build him a shelf for all he had acquired.

"You got a picture of your mama and daddy?"

"I think I did," Adam said, and he looked out the window, trying to remember a woman he had last seen walking away from him. He had no memory of Caleb, but in the boy's mind his father was always smiling, because that was what fathers did. "But I think somebody took it. Maybe Oscar Tremont. He already had a mama and a daddy picture, but he wanted another one." Noah came to him and put the boy in his lap and they looked out the window together. Adam said, "I ain't never goin home, huh?" Noah was silent.

FRIDAY

Noah did eighty-four sit-ups and a hundred and five pushups, then lay down where he was beside the bed, his arms folded under his head. Maggie came into the room and saw him,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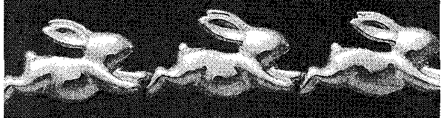
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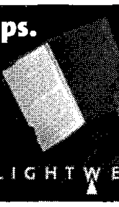
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"Dumb it up."

• •

waited a long time for him to move. He was still. The life insurance was paid up, but she could not remember if the policies were in the apartment or if they had returned them to the bank's safe-deposit box. She began to count the seconds and still he did not move. If she could survive picking out his casket, then maybe she could make it until after the funeral. There would be no end to the men who would be proud to be his pallbearers, to carry him home. He had been that kind of man. A good father, a good husband, a good grandfather, a good friend. Rest in peace, my love.

She went closer and Noah stirred. She had trouble catching her breath. He turned and saw something on her face. He asked, "What's the matter, honey?"

"Nothing." She herself had been looking forward to seeing India. She knew widowed grandmothers who had been forced to raise grandchildren alone, but she had never thought she could.

Noah sat up. "Well, somethin is the matter, cause I can see it on your face."

"Stop doing all those damn exercises, Noah." She sat at the foot of the bed.

"I'm addicted, honey." He leaned back on his elbows.

"Addicted, schmaddicted. Why don't you stop?"

"Look." He rolled up his pajama sleeve and flexed the muscle. "If I stopped, who would save you from the bad guys? Answer me that. Who would save you?" He scooted closer and offered the muscle to her and she felt it, tried unsuccessfully to press down on it. Noah looked at his arm, at the scars up and down it, and he looked up to see her watching him and rolled his sleeve down. He knew how each scar came to be, could describe the day it all happened and how long the pain had been with him. She got down from the bed onto her knees and he pulled her to him and sat her sideways in the valley that his thighs made with his chest. He kissed her hard, and when they opened their eyes and looked around, Elsa was staring at them, one of her dolls in her hand. The child was blinking but was not impressed one way or the other with what she was seeing.

MONDAY

At dawn he rose after only fifteen minutes of sleep, with the conversation he had had the evening before with Colbert Prentiss, the preacher, playing over and over in his head. "You ain't gonna give up on me, are you?" Noah joked. "It ain't in my nature to give up," Colbert said. "Give some thought to coming for next Sunday's grandparents' day." Noah did not have it in him to tell his friend that he did not think he would ever return to church. Noah asked before they hung up, "Didn't God have some responsibility to make nice so people would want to go on worshipping him? Why should it be so one-sided just because he happened to be God?"

He left Maggie still asleep and went to the children's room. Adam was standing in the middle of the floor, waiting, his tennis shoes on but still in his pajamas. Noah dreaded the question, so he jumped in: "Tell me about this home you so anxious to get back to." Elsa had just awoken and lay in bed with her eyes half open. Noah stood in front of Adam. "Tell me about it. I might wanna go live there myself."

Adam began describing the front yard, a grassless place, as it turned out, "except way over there in the corner." Elsa got out of bed and began singing and running around her grandfather and her brother. Adam then began talking about Mama Wilson's downstairs, but as he went on he had to correct himself many times, because he was confusing that woman's place with many others. "No," he said, "that big TV wasn't at Mama Wilson. She had a tiny one. No flowers, neither." He looked up at Noah, as if hoping the corrections hadn't done damage to the over-all truth of what he was saying. Noah sat on the floor, and Elsa immediately began climbing about him. Adam sat. In his last weeks at Mama Wilson's, he managed to say, he had had to share that bed with a boy who screamed in his sleep. Adam waited for his grandfather to say he had never mentioned having to share the bed. Elsa left off her grandfather and began climbing about Adam. "He wasn't such a bad little boy," Adam said, "once he stopped all that screamin." He hesitated, avoided his grandfather's eyes. "Really. He wasn't a bad little boy. Really and true." Noah did not speak. "Honest. He wasn't a bad boy after the screamin."

THURSDAY

A little before two that night Noah awoke after a few minutes of sleep and heard tiny voices.

At the children's bedroom door he saw Adam standing at Elsa's bed, telling her to go back to sleep, that he would keep her safe. "I tell you a story if you go

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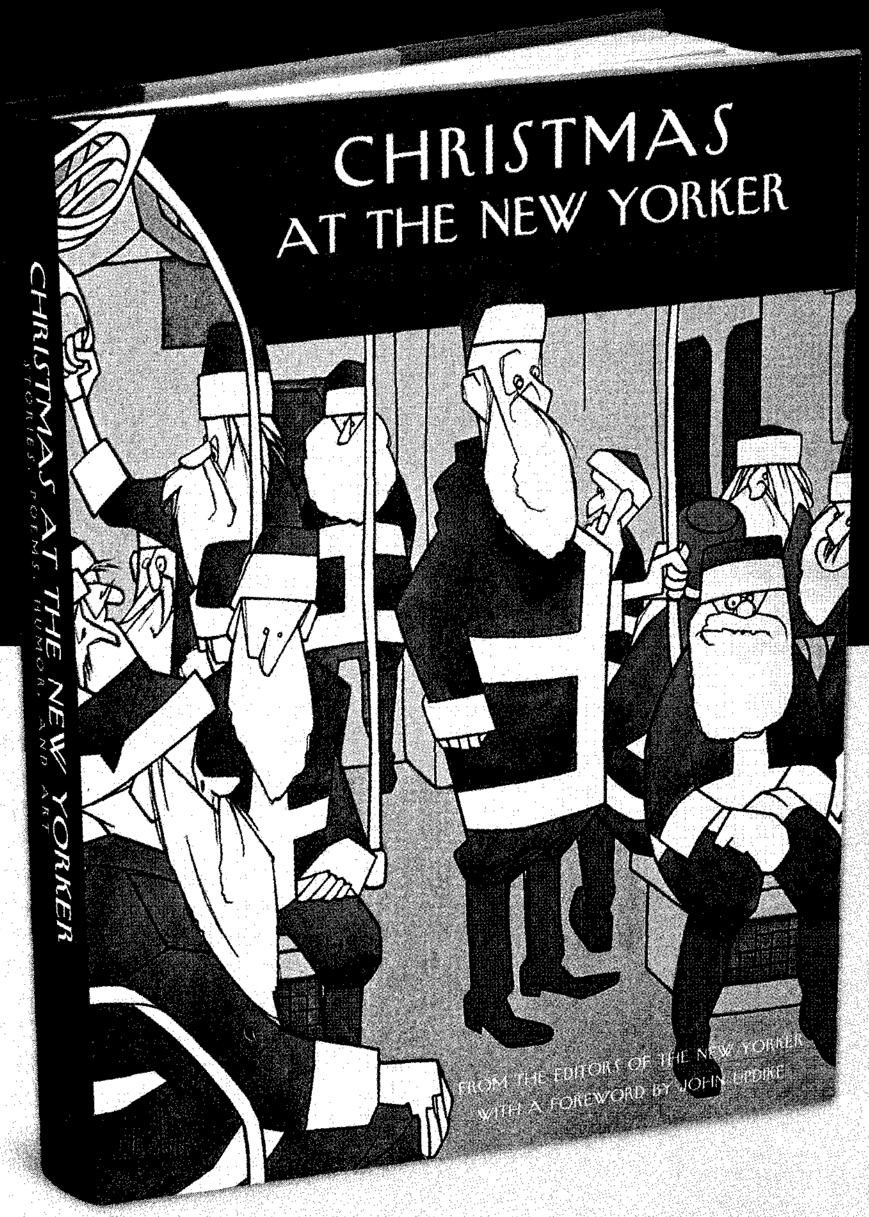
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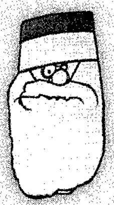

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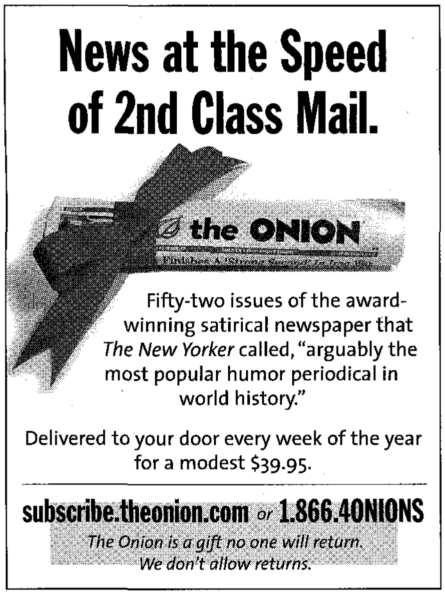

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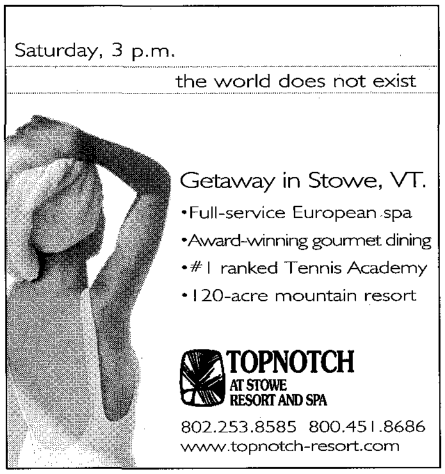

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back to sleep," Adam said. "All little chirren gotta be asleep." And Elsa said yes, yes, she would sleep for a story, but not no scary story. She lay down and Adam stayed at the side of the bed, pulling the covers up to her shoulders and placing a doll on either side of her. He began telling her about a little girl and a little boy who were driving alone to the beach in a car with bird wings. Noah went into the living room, the boy's voice still all around him. He did not know which way to turn, but after a long while the voice of Adam led him to the couch. The voice bade him to lie down. Noah covered himself with the throws and listened to the story of the little boy and the little girl going to the beach. It seemed to be a trip that had no end, and Noah kept waiting for them to arrive at the beach. The boy and the girl shared the driving. Sometimes they lost their way and squirrels with cowboy hats and boots had to drop from trees onto the hood of the car and tell them which way to go. There were mothers and fathers standing in Easter baskets along the road to the beach, and other children who were going places in their own cars—to the circus, to the movies. But no one except the boy and the girl were going to the beach. "Can they come, too?" Elsa asked. "Tomorrow," Adam said, "but not right now."

Noah began to fall asleep at the point where the girl was behind the ice-cream steering wheel and it began dripping on her new tennis shoes. "I can't drive with them dirty tennis shoes," the girl told the boy. "I can't, I can't, I can't." In a dream Noah applied cold hands to the ice-cream wheel and it froze over again. The boy thanked him and the girl thanked him, but when Noah asked about a short ride on up the road, the little girl said no. "First you," the girl said, biting into the chocolate wheel, "then all them other people will wanna ride, too. We gotta put a stop to this thing right here and now." As they drove off, the boy stuck his head out the window and said to Noah, "I come back for you way before the by-and-by. O.K.?"

Noah had watched his father putting on his tie not two days after they had arrived in Washington. His father's first job was as a dishwasher at the Willard Hotel. His mother had straightened his father's tie seconds before he walked out the door. "A man," his father said as he sat his new hat atop his head, "must do what a man must do."

When Noah woke again, it was nearly three o'clock and Adam was still talking. The boy in the story was driving up a mountain. "Don't go too fast," the girl told the boy. "We gotta save on the gas. Gas expensive. Five dollars." Noah turned on his side, and in no time at all he was asleep again. He was never to know when Adam went back to bed. In the dream, Noah began begging for a ride as the car came to a stop. The girl was a lost cause, he could tell that just by the confident way she had gripped the ice-cream wheel, but Noah, turning his pockets inside out to show how empty they were, began to plead his case before the boy. "Just a short ride on up the road," Noah told the boy. "We'll come back for you," the boy said, starting up the motor, "and when we do you must be ready."

SUNDAY

That last Sunday in August was grandparents' day at church and Noah, at the final moment, decided to go with them. "You sure you know the way?" Maggie said before they set off. Something compelled Colbert Prentiss to depart from his text near the end of his sermon that morning. It might have been all the grandparents he saw before him, all the people who had struggled into old age only to find themselves parents once again. Clement Carson. Mr. and Mrs. Harrelson. The widow Anderson. Colbert's own sister and brother-in-law. Mr. and Mrs. Apacka. Maggie and Noah Robinson. All of them the kind of people the preacher had built his rock on. The world was turned upside down when the mature ones were forced to do what the younger ones should be doing. Indeed, it was August, so why not have it snow outside, Colbert said to the hundreds. Why not lift our eyes to the sky and see all the pigs flying with their cherub wings?

He had the grandparents and their grandchildren stand and apologized to any who might have a touch of the shyness fever. He told his congregation that the people standing would lead them all out into a better day. The people sitting applauded.

Maggie helped Elsa stand up on the seat. Noah looked at those standing. Clement's three grandsons were not wearing suits, just white shirts and ties and dark pants. They were all taller than their grandfather. He found Mrs. Anderson's granddaughter across the aisle looking at him and he smiled at her, but she did not smile back. She blinked once and looked ahead. Noah's son Caleb had had a hard time sitting still in church, was forever turning and staring at what was about him. Noah looked down at the top of Adam's head. The crown had the same tuft of hair his son's had had. The barber always had a tough time mowing it down. "Should charge you extra for that bit a hair, Noah, but maybe I'll let it slide," the barber always said. And Noah would say, "You charge me the regular for the regular hair. Any damage after that and Caleb gonna pay."

The congregation began singing "The Blind Man Stood in the Road and Cried." The spiritual ended and everyone sat down and Adam looked up at Noah, sensing his grandfather's eyes on him. Elsa curled up in Maggie's lap and soon went to sleep, one arm stretched out to the wooden pocket on the back of the pew in front of them. The congregation sang "I Done Done What Ya Told Me to Do." Without even thinking about it, Noah pulled Adam close to him and they looked at the words in the book and Adam began to cry. The boy put one hand behind his grandfather's back and grabbed hold of his suit coat as best he could. Still crying, he went over the words in the book with his finger. It was an old trick of an old boy: if you pretended to read, maybe they wouldn't notice that you really couldn't. Adam held on to Noah's coat, for he knew it was possible for people to rise up and disappear out of his life. He could not then know that Noah had already told God that he planned to live forever. Why should eternal life be only for bonsai trees? Why should men, the greatest glory of God, come second to trees? Noah placed his hand over Adam's as it went over the words in the book. Adam grabbed more of the coat and it was then that Noah, feeling himself go light as a blossom in the wind, leaned down and anchored his lips to that difficult tuft of the boy's hair. ♦

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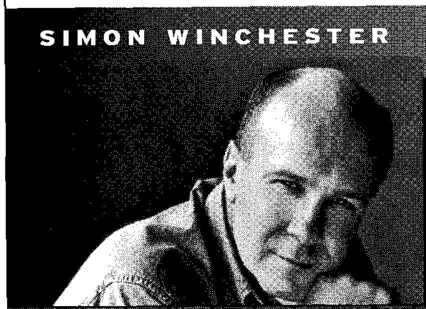

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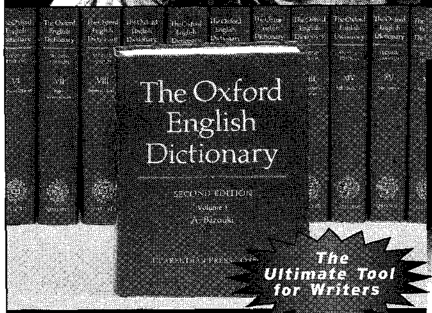

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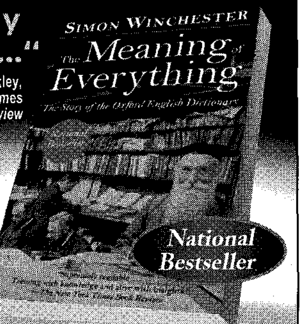
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THE CRITICS

A CRITIC AT LARGE

SIXTEEN TONS OF FUN

Eric Idle brings the Holy Grail to Broadway.

BY DAVE EGGERS

When "Monty Python's Flying Circus" first began taping in London, in the fall of 1969, studio audiences were totally unprepared for what they were about to see. People brought in off the street, expecting to watch one of the BBC's comedies or variety shows—most of them broad and campy—were given, for example, a sketch about sheep who try to fly, and how flying sheep, with the right engineering, might be made to accommodate human passengers and used for economical mass transit. Older ladies, bused in and anticipating domestic comedy—or even an actual circus—were given a play-by-play account of Pablo Picasso's efforts to paint a masterpiece while riding a bicycle. That segment, filmed in the suburbs of London and shown to the studio audience, included references to Chagall, Miró, Brancusi, and Léger—and marked perhaps the first and only time that Kurt Schwitters has been used as a punch line. Did the audience laugh? Not much.

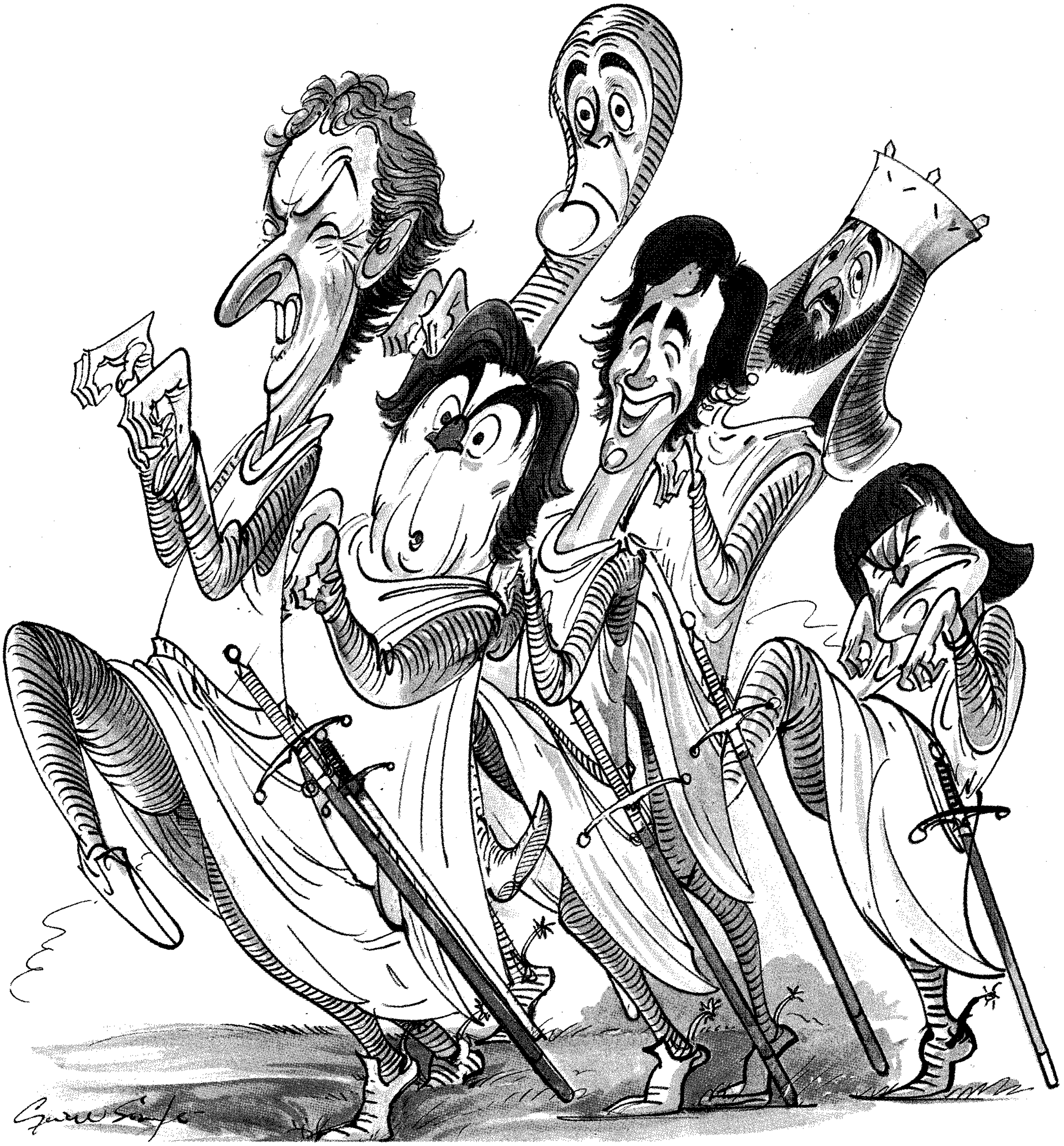
After the first handful of episodes aired in Britain—late on Sundays—few people knew what to make of "Monty Python's Flying Circus." BBC executives were concerned, the family members of the group were concerned, and, for the most part, the members of Python were concerned. "Do you realize," John Cleese said to Michael Palin before the first taping, "this could be the first comedy show to go out with absolutely no laughs at all?" When the comedy was big and wet—sixteen-ton weights falling onto cast members, would-be soldiers killed while attacking each other with bananas and raspberries—the response was warm. Much of the time, though, the studio audiences were respectful but confused. BBC executives shuttled the show into ever-changing time slots, and hoped it would disappear.

"Monty Python's Flying Circus" was a sketch show written and performed by six men—Graham Chapman, John Cleese, Terry Gilliam, Terry Jones, Eric Idle, and Michael Palin—all of whom (except for Gilliam, an American) had attended Cambridge or Oxford, writing and performing in college revues. After college, they enjoyed successful careers in TV, including stints on the droll news sendup "The Frost Report" and a children's show called "Do Not Adjust Your Set." When they joined forces, they created a program that combined startling erudition, theatrical precision, and utter madness. All the while, the Pythons employed a brazenness about what they considered funny that went unmatched until the early days of "Late Night with David Letterman." In any given episode of "Monty Python," there are usually only a few segments that would be considered ha-ha funny by a wide swath of people. These sketches, involving silly walks, nudges and winks, and songs about cross-dressing lumberjacks, share equal time with those segments which are disquieting—like the sketch wherein a son takes his dead mother to the undertaker and, after considering various burying and cremation options, decides to eat her. Some bits were just willfully odd. A man in full armor hitting a man with a rubber chicken, for example, may have been preceded by a sophisticated satire of the British judicial system, with a cameo, for no discernible reason, by Cardinal Richelieu.

"Monty Python" was always closer to Dada than to "Laugh-In," and as the show matured the episodes became ever more conceptually advanced. In 2000, A&E reissued, on DVD, all forty-five episodes of the show in one boxed set, and watching them in order reveals a steady progression: at first, the group seems generally eager for the audience's approval, even mugging occasionally; over the course of seasons two, three, and four, the writing becomes braver, angrier, stylistically restless, and more likely to go for long stretches without overt attempts at humor. Monty Python's goal was not only to make audiences laugh but, just as important, to tear apart the medium of television with extreme prejudice. As a whole, the series, which ended in 1974, has no competition for being the most consistently bizarre program ever aired on TV.

Was it a British thing? That was the assumption by some, and it remains the explanation offered by those for whom Python's humor does little. In the early days, there were various half-hearted attempts to bring the show over to the United States—Lorne Michaels reportedly sold "Saturday Night Live" as " 'Monty Python' meets '60 Minutes' "—but the first major exposure American audiences had to Python was via Johnny Carson. After a highly successful Canadian stage tour in 1973, the group was invited to do a series of sketches on the "Tonight Show"—hosted by Joey Bishop on that particular night. The result was dropped-jaw silence. The curtain went up and Chapman and Idle performed a piece involving the burying of a cat. Idle: "I just spent four hours burying the cat." Chapman: "Four hours to bury the cat?" Idle: "Yes, it wouldn't keep still, wriggling about, howling its head off." It was a while before network television came calling again. Did the Pythons care? Not much. Then and always, they cared if people laughed, but they didn't care if *everyone* laughed.

In 1974, a group of PBS stations bought broadcast rights for the first three seasons, and soon enough the show was



The Knights of Monty Python: Eric Idle, Terry Jones, John Cleese, Michael Palin, Graham Chapman, and Terry Gilliam.

GERALD SCARFE

sluicing its way into the brains of, according to Palin, "insomniacs, intellectuals, and burglars" in North America. In addition to the expected audience of college students—who understood the show as a collision between a comedy-variety show and surrealism in its purest form—others just liked to laugh at the funny men dressed as middle-aged women. The show wasn't always easy to find in the United States, but its following became central to any effective PBS pledge drive. The Pythons were heroes to the Second City contingent, and had made their way to Graceland. Elvis Presley, a big fan, was known to quote Idle's "Nudge Nudge" skit to his friends.

With a growing audience came attempts to conquer the United States through movies. Their first film, "And Now for Something Completely Different"—essentially a string of extant skits filmed and stitched together, with better production values—didn't make much of a splash at the box office. "Monty Python and the Holy Grail" was released in 1975, after the completion of the fourth and final season, when the members of the group were already considering what their post-Python personas would be. The film, an account of King Arthur assembling his knights and their quest for the Holy Grail, was filmed in Scotland, on a budget of about two hundred thousand pounds. Unable to fund the movie through established

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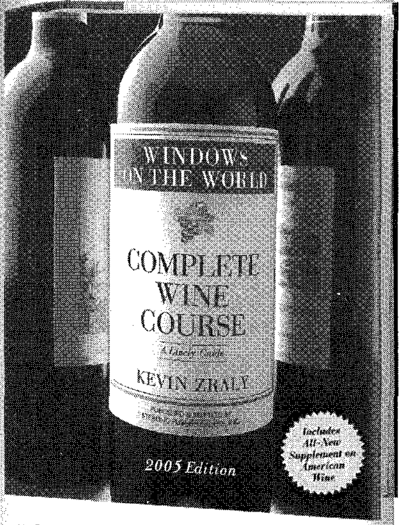

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production companies, the group, popular in the rock world, secured investments from members of Pink Floyd, Genesis, and Led Zeppelin, who chipped in some twenty thousand pounds each. The five-week shoot was brutal. It rained most days, and the Pythons spent much of their time in faux-chain-mail costumes made of heavy wool, soaked through. For their suffering, and for their writing and acting services, each member of Monty Python was paid about four thousand pounds.

"The Holy Grail" did a decent business, as did their next film, ninety minutes of vicious and brilliant heresy called "Monty Python's Life of Brian" (1979). The story of a man (Chapman), who is mistaken for the Messiah, it was as much a satire of religious zealotry as it was a comment on Middle East factionalism in the seventies, featuring the inevitable and deadly battle between the People's Front of Judea and the Judean People's Front. Protests by Christian leaders preceded it everywhere it went, and it was banned in Ireland.

The group's final movie, "Monty Python's The Meaning of Life" (1983), marked a return to an episodic format, and was the angriest thing the group had ever created. It included a sequence wherein Graham Chapman is chased over a cliff by a pack of topless women wearing helmets, and "Every Sperm Is Sacred," possibly the most elaborate Catholic-mocking Busby Berkeley production number ever committed to film. "The Meaning of Life," too, was banned in Ireland, but it was sent to Cannes as a British entry. On landing in France, Terry Jones, who had directed the film, declared that Monty Python would win a major award, because the group had bribed the judges. "The Meaning of Life" actually did win the Special Grand Jury Prize, and in his acceptance speech Jones (whose suit jacket bore the words "EAT MORE PORK") let the judges know that the money was in the bathroom, behind the washbasins.

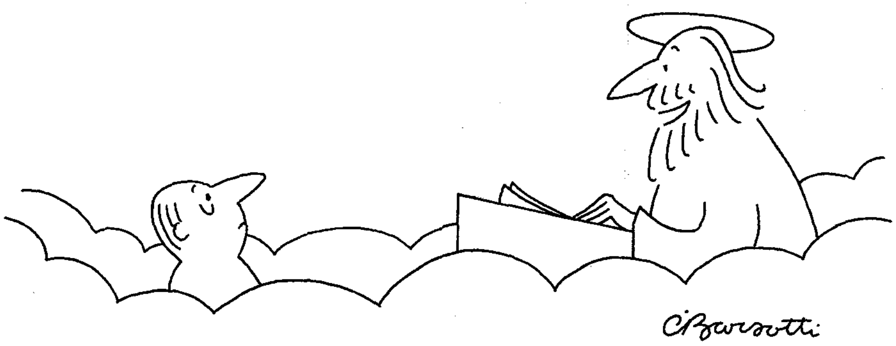
At that point, the group called it quits and went their separate ways. Idle and Cleese eventually moved to California to act in movies and do their own writing. Gilliam went on to a successful career as a director of films, among them "Brazil" and "Twelve Monkeys," often employing former Pythons. Palin appeared in "Brazil," for example, and also wrote novels and guidebooks, and hosts a series of BBC travel shows. Jones directed his own movies, including "Personal Services"—also banned in Ireland—and "The Wind in the Willows," and at the moment is writing op-eds for the *Guardian*. Chapman died in 1989. The Pythons have appeared together only twice in the past eighteen years.

Its color reminds one of lightly tanned Caucasian flesh, or putty. Its foundation is teak, stained luxuriously. Its body is segmented, much in the way of certain insects, or most couches. In fact, it resembles in many ways a small modular love seat, or a praying mantis. On its upper extremities rests a modest matching pillow, rectangular and leather-enclosed, awaiting a human head. It is a comfortable-seeming thing, flexible without being adjustable, giving without being pliant.

"This is the chair," Eric Idle said. On a bright October day in Los Angeles, Idle stood above the chair, looking down on it. The chair was empty because Idle was standing.

"Yes, this is the one," Idle reiterated. This was the chair in which the first pages, and the pages in the middle, and, later on, the last pages of "Spamalot," the musical-comedy adaptation of "Monty Python and the Holy Grail," were written.

Above both Idle and the chair, questions hovered. Was Idle anxious? Nervous? Sick to his stomach? After all, in a few days he would fly to New York, where rehearsals of "Spamalot"—an eleven-million-dollar production starring Hank Azaria (of "The Simpsons" and "Huff"), Tim Curry (of "The Rocky Horror Picture Show"), and David Hyde Pierce (the Emmy-winning co-star of "Frasier")—were to begin, under the guidance of Mike Nichols, winner of various Tonys, Oscars, and Emmys. Was Idle wishing he were working with a more experienced cast, a more seasoned director? The musical would begin previews in Chicago on December 21st, and move to Broadway in February. That much was certain. But the unknowns persisted: Would Broadway audiences take to the Pythons' particular brand of humor? Would they be able to understand all the words, if spoken with accents—one of them French? And, perhaps most important:



"Theologian? You guys are always fun."

• •

Could a low-budget film, wherein King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table pretend to ride horses with the aid of pages banging coconuts together, be adapted for the stage, thirty years later, with the world at war?

Eric Idle looked at the chair, but on that day the chair offered no answers.

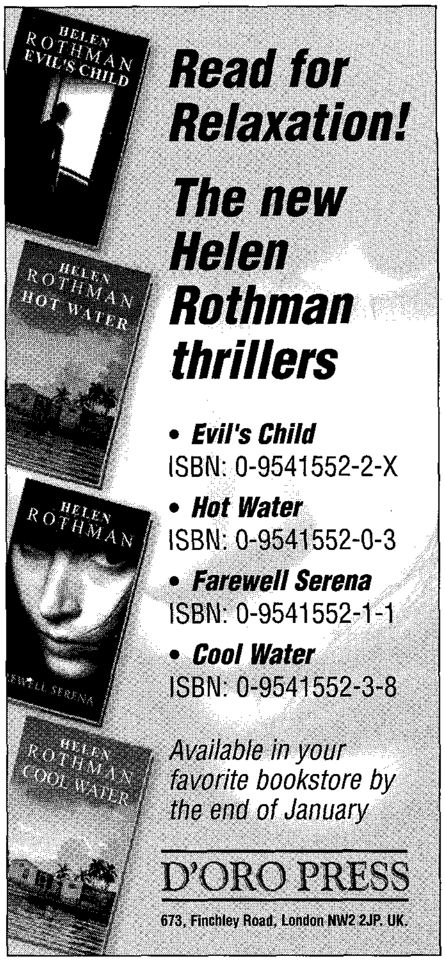
Idle had just finished giving a tour of his Los Angeles home, a sort of museum of Python paraphernalia. His basement is full of Python-themed toys, including various "Holy Grail" figurines and a Black Knight with removable limbs (bloody). There were Monty Python records and books and an action figure of Mr. Creosote, the blowsy gourmand who explodes in "The Meaning of Life" after ingesting one simple mint, wafer-thin. The only problem with the toy Creosote is that the vomit it expels is green and viscous, whereas it's commonly known that in the movie Creosote's vomit is peach-colored and has the consistency of watery paste.

"That, uh, hadn't occurred to me," Idle said, politely. "But look at this." He pointed to a facsimile of King Arthur's chain-mail crown apparatus, resting on a candelabra in his foyer. "It's far more elaborate than the one we used in the film. We used tin, or some light metal. People, you know, are insane."

It would be easy to imagine that as a founding member of Monty Python's Flying Circus Idle would have conflicting feelings about the group. Last year, they published a book, extraordinary in its candor, called "The Pythons Autobiography by the Pythons." It's told in an oral-history format, and contains all the fights and struggles—power and personal—one would expect, including Chapman's difficulty first with coming out as gay and later with alcoholism. Though the members of the group have obvious familial affection for each other, dozens of disagreements simmer on the page—chiefly those involving the direction of the group during and after its heyday. One is left with the impression that most of the group's members were, at various times, ready to put their Python days behind them. John Cleese in particular seemed anxious to make a break. He chose to leave Python before the group's fourth season (going on to "Fawlty Towers"), and, years later, it was Cleese who put the kibosh on the idea of another Python movie.

But Idle has always, it seemed, been happy to have been a Python, happy to talk about Python, happy to revisit the group's glory days. Even though he's gone on to his own work—dozens of films, plays, TV shows, albums, books, and screenplays (including a yet-to-be-produced parody of a Merchant-Ivory film, called "The Remains of the Piano")—he is perhaps the most active standard-bearer for the group. It was Idle who toured extensively in 2000 and 2003, performing Python songs with a band and backup singers. He went on the road first with the Eric Idle Exploits Monty Python Tour, then with the Greedy Bastard Tour, which was documented extensively on the Python Web site he launched in 1996.

Idle was perhaps the most musically inclined Python, and wrote the majority of the songs the group produced over the years. He now has about a hundred and fifty songs to his credit, among them some of Monty Python's most famous, including "The Galaxy Song," from "The Meaning of Life," and "Always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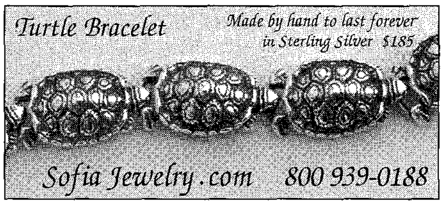
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Look on the Bright Side of Life," sung by Idle at the end of "Life of Brian" as his character is crucified on a Jerusalem hillside. Idle's lyrics tend, in that song and elsewhere, to be jolly in their open-eyed optimism ("When you're chewing on life's gristle / Hey, don't grumble, give a whistle") while cut with profanity and a relatively dark world view ("Life's a piece of shit / When you look at it").

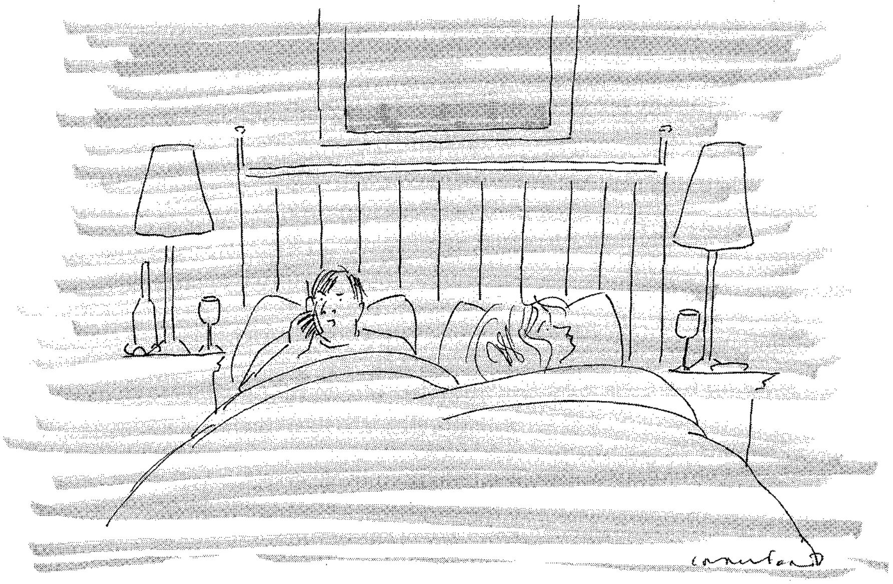
A composer named John Du Prez played trumpet on that recording, and became Idle's longtime collaborator, co-writing music for "The Meaning of Life." Idle had been thinking about writing a musical comedy with Du Prez for years, ever since he'd starred as Ko-Ko, the Lord High Executioner, in the English National Opera's 1986 production of "The Mikado." Two years later, he was in the Los Angeles office of Mel Brooks, pitching a stage adaptation of "The Producers." Brooks declined, wanting to concentrate on films, and being unsure, in any case, that such a thing would work.

"I was right about 'The Producers,'" Idle said, now sitting in his chair. "I was there on opening night, and I knew it was going to be a gigantic hit. And at that point I had had the idea for the 'Holy Grail' musical, but I dismissed it because of the Python business thing."

Long ago, the Pythons made an informal agreement that any one of them had veto power over possible Python projects. Over the years, this has protected them from a variety of ill-advised spinoffs or misuses of the Python name, but the requirement has hampered many other endeavors. In 1998, the Pythons reunited at the U.S. Comedy Arts Festival, in Aspen, for an onstage panel discussion hosted by Robert Klein. Midway through, the purported remains of Graham Chapman were brought out and placed on a coffee table around which the Pythons sat. Not only did Gilliam knock over the urn, sending dust everywhere, but after it had been righted it began talking—or rattling, from within, answering questions with one knock or two. In the wake of that event, there was talk of a tour, with the group reënacting stage versions of some of their most famous skits. But the notion fizzled when Michael Palin backed out. "There's always someone saying no," Idle said. (He's said no himself in the past.) "I suppose it was for the best this time. We didn't all turn out to be disappointing old farts—people saying, 'I went to see them and they're all so *old*.'"

Given the fickle and hypercritical nature of the group, in conceiving "Spamalot" Idle had to manage his expectations. He prepared intensely on his own, before even telling the other Pythons he was working on the musical. Determined to assemble the most polished presentation possible, he sent the Pythons not only a draft of the script but half a dozen studio versions of the songs.

Idle got out of his chair. "You want to hear the song that did it?" He was already at his computer, looking for the



"I'm sorry, but Pauline's sleeping now. With me! And she's mine—all mine! You hapless 3 A.M. ex!"

tune. He then played a song called "The Song That Goes Like This." It was simultaneously a perfect booming Broadway ballad and a ruthless taking apart of the booming Broadway ballad.

Idle was not supposed to be revealing details of the show, but he seemed too excited to hold back. He retrieved some of the early sketches for the production and showed those. Then he was back at the computer, where he played an iMovie version of the musical, assembled by the set and costume designer, Tim Hatley. Using Gilliam-style cutouts, the animated mockup ran through all the set changes and production numbers. There were dozens of people working on costumes and sets—even the transformation of the outside of the Shubert Theatre, which would be made to look like a castle. "Just watch," Idle said. "They'll be using hand-tooled coconuts flown in from Bali."

After sending out the "Spamalot" songs and script, Idle waited for the Pythons' approval, expecting that it might take weeks or months. Palin was in the Himalayas for the BBC; Cleese was in Santa Barbara; and Jones, when he received the package, was in his garden in London with Gilliam. Somehow, Idle heard back from all of them in short order. Terry Jones organized a conference call to talk about it, and later sent an e-mail to Idle. "There was an unnerving degree of agreement," he wrote. "Terry G. and John were both (surprisingly) tempted to get more involved in the project because they thought it was so good, but were tempered by the feeling that it is really your project and that you wouldn't appreciate interference from superannuated, white-haired ex-Pythons."

Idle received notes of encouragement and constructive criticism of the script from the Pythons, but for the most part they have been operating on the assumption that this is Idle's project, for better or worse. "If it flops," Idle said, sitting down again in his chair, "they can just blame me. They can walk right away: 'Well, Eric fucked it up.' If it succeeds, though, they'll be there opening night." Then he laughed for a long time.

"Twenty years ago, we might have been a bit more precious about it all," Terry Jones said, "but now we're more relaxed." Jones was talking by phone from London, where he'd just returned from a screening at the National Film Theatre of two unearthed episodes of "The Complete and Utter History of Britain," a TV series he wrote with Michael Palin in the sixties. Watching it now, he was horrified.

"Everyone was laughing tonight, but I was so furious!" he said. The pacing had been off, the soundtrack all wrong; the material he and Palin had written was wrecked. "It was doing 'The Complete and Utter History of Britain' that got me really convinced that you have to control everything," he said. "You not only act in the things—you've got to actually start directing the things as well. When we were doing 'Python' the TV show, I was a real pain in the neck. I would plant myself next to the director, Ian MacNaughton, and impose myself." After MacNaughton directed "And Now for Something Completely Different," the Pythons decided to guide the next project themselves. Jones and Gilliam, co-directors of "The Holy Grail," were still learning their craft, though, when the first cut of the film was shown to investors. "It was a disaster, an absolute disaster," Jones said. "People laughed for the first few minutes, then just silence all the way through the rest."

The film was reëdited, and given a new soundtrack. The first, very serious score was replaced by tinny, faux-heroic music, which made the film funny again. Jones directed the next two films, each of them more complex and expensive than the one before. "The Meaning of Life" included seven songs, three of them with elaborate staging, including the finale, a horrifying Broadway-meets-Reno number called "Christmas in Heaven." Jones is an aficionado of musicals, and he recently helped bring "The Play What I Wrote," a successful British production about a pair of music-hall comics, from London to New York. It was co-produced by Mike Nichols, but it closed after two and a half months, and left Jones unsure of just what works onstage in America. With the TV show and the films, Jones always knew who the audience was: the Python audience, first and foremost, was the Pythons themselves.

"If all six of us laughed at something, then we all felt, That's O.K., we can go ahead with that. And for me it was just a question of getting that on the screen,

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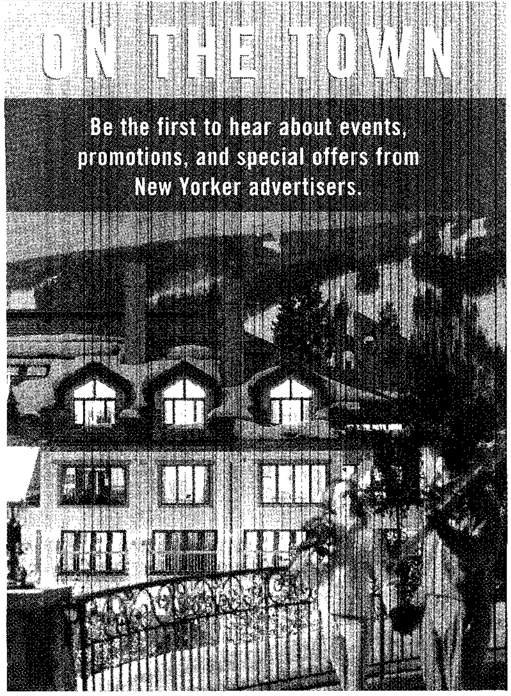

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getting that moment of us sitting around the read-through, that moment where we all laughed, all six of us saying, 'Yeah, yeah, that's funny.'"

"To understand Python, you have to understand the six people within, and how we all changed and developed," Michael Palin said, when he was reached in England. "There was a very light touch in the first series, I grant you. There was a wonderful feeling of play—Hey, we can do it, we're free! And then we became slightly more self-conscious about that freedom as time went on, and we began to think, Where do we go from here? You can't always have sketches about flying sheep—you have to move on. Where are they flying *to*?"

Each of the members of Python had specialties and sensibilities—"checks and balances," Palin said—with Chapman and Cleese inclined toward the more shocking material, and Jones and Palin to longer, more narrative-driven pieces. Idle, who often wrote alone, was good with one-liners, characters, music, and titles. (His original title for "Life of Brian" was "Jesus Christ: Lust for Glory," Palin said.) But, whatever their strengths, they wrote for the group, generally not deciding who would play what part until the writing was finished—unusual in group comedy. In fact, though it would be easy to assume that Python's influence has been wide and pervasive, it's hard to see extensive evidence of it. In terms of sheer scope and intelligence and willingness to hit the extremes of high-brow and low, only a few shows have come close: the late-seventies show "SCTV"; "The Kids in the Hall," a Canadian show that ran into the mid-nineties; and "Mr. Show," the recent HBO series starring David Cross and Bob Odenkirk.

"I think we had a negative effect," Terry Jones said. "Python shows were very, very packed, and we covered such a lot of subjects and styles. And afterward people began to say, 'Oh, we can't do that—Python already did that.'"

"That was a strength of Python—not trying to just please and broaden the audience more and more," Palin said. "We sort of felt it was our duty not to be soft." By the time "The Meaning of Life" came around, the members of Python, all now hovering around forty years old, moved in a direction that would seem counterintuitive. Though they wrote the film together, in Jamaica, the humor was pitch-black throughout. "Maybe just the fun had gone out of Python a bit," Palin said. "To convince ourselves we were doing something good and strong, we had to make it punchy and more shocking."

Palin acknowledges that he's usually painted as the villain for squashing the idea of a stage tour after the Aspen festival, but he's cautiously supportive of the adaptation. "Knowing what I know about Broadway, which isn't a lot, it seems like quite a risky venture," he said. He counted this in the musical's favor. "This is really breaking new ground with 'Spamalot,' taking Python material but not doing it with the Pythons. There was a time when I would have minded, and would have felt very defensive about what we'd done, protecting every single aspect of its writing and performance. But this is a move on, to see if Python can be given a new life. I watch with some excitement, trepidation, and delight."

In mid-October, Idle was eating lunch in a midtown Manhattan sushi restaurant, and he looked a bit wan. It was cold in New York, and he'd been up much of the night before, revising Act II. "Spamalot" rehearsals had begun three days earlier, and during the first read-through with the complete cast Idle was dissatisfied with the flow of the show. In Los Angeles, he'd pointed to a page of his notebook that said, "Never mind the plot—it's Python!" But he realized that the demands of a large-scale musical comedy are different. The movie, for example, ends quite suddenly when the actors are arrested by police for the murder of the TV historian who, early in the film, while narrating a documentary, is hacked to death by a marauding knight.

"We thought about ending with the cops," Idle said, "but it's a downer. We want people feeling good when they leave the theatre to get their dinners."

Nichols, in particular, was adamant that the show be more than an assemblage of Monty Python's greatest hits. It had to make sense, had to tell a story, and, at the same time, had to please many disparate groups at once: the longtime Python fans, the sometime Python fans, and people who might, even now, think they were going to see an actual circus. Idle leaned over the table and shaped his hands around an imaginary small animal.

"There are some things you know will be there—killer rabbits—but you also need to feel that you're getting somewhere, that it isn't just a random revue."

The waiter, a tall man with halting English, came to the table and greeted Idle. When the waiter saw a tape recorder, he began whispering. He crouched near Idle, and whisper-asked if he would like some water. Idle picked up the cue. He leaned away from the tape recorder—as if it were a sleeping baby not to be woken—and whispered that he would. The waiter seemed confused, but soon came to the conclusion that, given Idle's whispering, he, the waiter, should not speak at all. He mouthed a "sorry" and left. For the rest of the meal, whenever the waiter approached, Idle spoke to him sotto voce. In response, the waiter nodded gravely and served in absolute silence.

Idle was tired, but optimistic. John Cleese had been in town the day before, and walked into the rehearsal just as the cast was singing "Knights of the Round Table," the lyrics of which Cleese had written with Chapman in 1974. "He had this big grin on his face," Idle recalled. The song, which in the film is the biggest production number, is played in "Spamalot" as a Vegas-style bombardment of sight and sound, complete with a line of showgirls in body stockings. "Who would have thought we'd have all these people taking it so seriously—learning the lines, learning the steps? Thirty years later, to see people doing this stuff—it's touching. It actually makes you want to cry."

But certain logistical problems persisted. In the movie, Cleese, at six feet five, played the Black Knight, who refuses to grant King Arthur the victory in a sword fight, even after Arthur has chopped off all four of his limbs. Idle and Nichols had been discussing how to make the Black Knight work onstage.

"We thought we'd be able to get a pair of dwarfs, but it was prohibitively expensive," Idle said. "You'd think you'd be able to get them for half price, but no."

A prevailing theory among many of those involved in "Spamalot" is that the success of a string of offbeat musicals—"The Producers," "Urinetown," "Avenue Q"—bodes well for a Python extravaganza. It's difficult to imagine investors lining up a decade ago, with "Cats" and "Les Misérables" dominating Broadway.

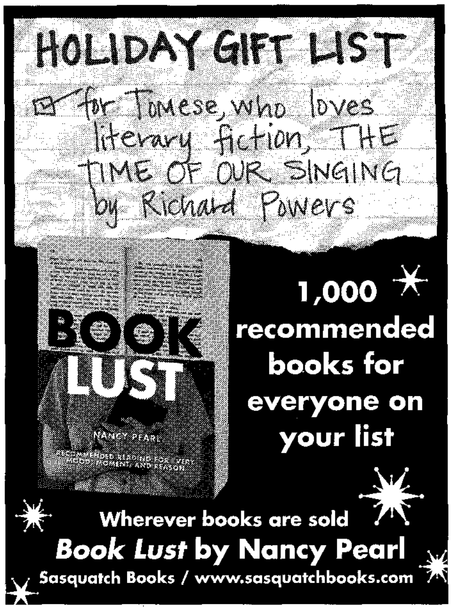
"To me, 'The Producers' is the punchback of the comedy musical," Idle said. "For years, there was nothing to laugh at, just Andrew Lloyd Webber and the plates on people's faces. I refuse to believe people really enjoyed it, though they would say, 'Oh, it's wonderful—all that *fog!*'" Still, he was aware that there needed to be certain concessions. "There are one or two deliberately Broadwayish-type songs," he went on. "But that's the joy of it, that Python thing. Each thing we do also mocks the form that it's in. The books, the records, the films—that's part of what we do. We recognize the form that we're in. That's postmodernism, isn't it? And I think we were there before postmodernism. We precede . . . was it Deru— What's his name, the French guy?"

"Derrida?"

"Right. We precede him. In fact, I think he stole his stuff from 'The Holy Grail.' You know, that movie is still playing in France. There's apparently a thirty-seat cinema in Paris that's played 'The Holy Grail' for three decades. That explains a lot."

Two hours later, the "Spamalot" cast was filing into a rehearsal room that looked exactly like what a rehearsal room for a Broadway musical should look like. The windows were gigantic and overlooked Forty-second Street, the floors were wood, and there was a floor-to-ceiling mirror occupying one wall. The actors wore sweatpants, sweatshirts (some ripped), and even leg warmers. There was a piano in the corner, with a man playing it and a woman turning pages for him. Mike Nichols was overseeing it all, Jedi style, unshakable, smiling benevolently.

"I knew going in that musicals are the closest thing to hell on earth," he said. "I have too much experience to ever think that doing a musical could ever be fun, but this is as close to that as it's possible to come." Nichols had a movie,



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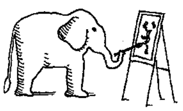

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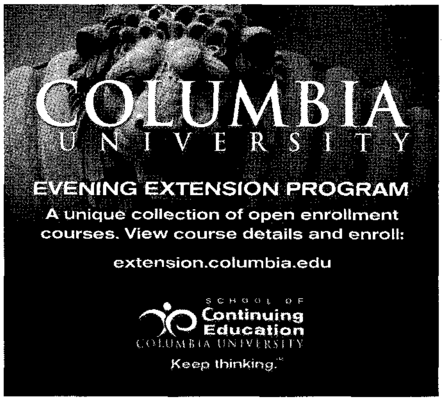

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"Closer," approaching its première, yet he was spending most of every day directing a musical with a cast of twenty-three and a crew of fifty-one. "When they asked me to direct it, I said, 'I can't see it.' They said, 'Will you just come and listen to a read-through?' And I did, and of course I laughed my ass off," he said. "A friend asked me to explain how we were adapting the movie for the stage, and I thought about it and said, 'O.K., you know how, in the movie, there's a cow that flies out of a castle and lands on a page? Well, in the musical, the cow has a singing part.'"

While Idle originally pictured a cast of unknowns, Nichols handpicked a group of actors—Azaria, Curry, Hyde Pierce—to play the leads, and every one of them said yes immediately, and has committed to eight performances a week for up to a year. Azaria has known "The Holy Grail" by heart since he was fifteen; Hyde Pierce can pinpoint the moment when he first saw "Monty Python" as a teen-ager: "I remember explicitly that I was home and I was up late. I turned on Channel 17, the PBS station in upstate New York, and they were doing a skit called 'The Dull Life of a City Stockbroker.' Michael Palin was in a bowler hat, and he would step out to get the paper and unbeknownst to him a Zulu warrior would pop out of the bushes and try to stick him with a spear. And the stockbroker's day continues that way, with all of these near-death experiences. It was astounding—the combination of absolutely dry wit and total anarchy."

The cast settled into a semicircle, each with a new version of the second act of "Spamalot." This would be their first read-through. Against the barre, at a long table, Idle and Nichols sat side by side, with John Du Prez; Casey Nicholaw, the choreographer; and about a dozen others.

When the read-through began, it became immediately clear that the dialogue in the act, much of which hadn't been changed from the original film, was holding up well, even with different actors, almost all of them American. It's easy to forget that the Pythons were writers first, performers second; thus the script of "The Holy Grail" is funny on the page, as is "Spamalot." Tim Curry (not American) was playing King Arthur dignified and oblivious, just as Chapman had, but because Curry has to sing, he's added both more camp and more melancholy to the role. David Hyde Pierce, playing Sir Robin, Idle's character in the movie, read the same lines, and he was very funny, while playing a different Robin—less the utterly spineless coward and more a bumbling, misunderstood wuss. Hank Azaria was playing both the French Taunter and Sir Lancelot, and while Lancelot is now more murderous, he's also somewhat sexually disoriented.

While the principals read their lines, they laughed at each other, and they laughed at the readings of the actors with secondary parts, and Idle and Nichols laughed at everyone, even though they'd heard most of the lines many, many times. When the knights were faced with the peril of the Knights Who Say Ni!, suddenly "Ni!"s were coming from all over the room, and it became evident that Idle himself was providing some of the stabbing, high-pitched "Ni!"s. As Nichols, seventy-four, sat next to him, red-faced from laughing, Idle, sixty-one, was almost out of his seat, yelling "Ni! Ni! Ni!"

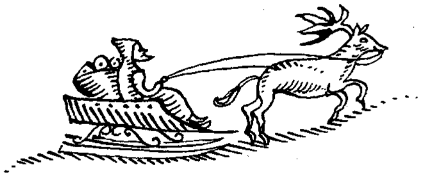
Meanwhile, though, a handful of the dancers were not laughing. They had scripts on their laps and were reading along, but they did not laugh once in the forty minutes of Act II. While most of the room was breaking up, these dancers read along with confused, frozen smiles. They either weren't listening, were too tired, or weren't getting it.

Though there are undoubtedly more insomniacs, intellectuals, and burglars in the world now than when the show first aired, Python will always leave some people bewildered. Here in the Jerry Zaks rehearsal room—two floors below the studio where Billy Crystal was rehearsing "700 Sundays," wherein he does impressions and tells sentimental stories about growing up—there were a bunch of adults practicing a musical-comedy version of a thousand-year-old quest for a golden goblet. This production will make absolutely no sense to a certain segment of the population, but to those who see the point—the absurdities of history, the absurdities of royalty and religion and warfare and songs and stages and lines and outfits and audiences and living—it will mean everything in the world. ♦

BRIEFLY NOTED

East Side Story, *by Louis Auchincloss (Houghton Mifflin; $24).* Auchincloss's sixtieth book is a novel of power and hypocrisy in upper-class New York that, like much of his previous fiction, focusses on the agonizing conflict between America's proudly Protestant face and its tawdry capitalist backside. The book consists of eleven linked portraits chronicling the rise of the fiercely Presbyterian Carnochan family, from Old World Scottish thread merchants in Colonial America to lawyers, bankers, and business tycoons in the modern era. The Carnochan men follow their forebears to Yale and, with a few exceptions, to worldly success. But, dedicated to little more than "their own permanence," they also expose the moral bankruptcy of their class. Auchincloss, who is eighty-seven, and himself something of a Gotham patrician, casts a chilly eye upon the American empire that families like the Carnochans helped to build.

The Seas, *by Samantha Hunt (MacAdam/Cage; $23).* Set in a far northern coastal town, Hunt's début novel is an aqueous affair, flooded with water themes. The nameless town has even attracted scientific study, because it has the highest rate of alcoholism in America. All the inhabitants want to escape, but the ocean pulls them back. The protagonist is a young woman whose father was lost at sea, and who falls for a Gulf War veteran with scars resembling gills. He entertains her advances ambivalently; as it turns out, he's literally dissolving back into water. It's the kind of novel in which King Neptune and several mermaids put in appearances, and which leaves no metaphor unrealized—the woman falls on some scattered movable type and is bruised by words. In other hands, this might all feel distinctly soggy, but Hunt's writing is free of affectation and carries surprising conviction.



Margot Fonteyn, *by Meredith Daneman (Viking; $32.95).* Daneman's biography is probably the closest examination that could be made of the notoriously reticent English ballerina. In the nineteen-thirties, British ballet, which still barely existed, needed a young, homegrown star. The teen-aged Fonteyn stepped into the light, and over the next three decades her simplicity, lyricism, and understated emotionalism—qualities nursed in her by the great choreographer Frederick Ashton—came to represent the English style in classical dance. Then Rudolf Nureyev, almost twenty years her junior, defected to the West, and their lady-tames-lion partnership kept her dancing into her sixties—too long, but who cares now? Daneman tells us the hard parts: Fonteyn's weakness for men who treated her badly ("Shit, shit, you dance like shit," Nureyev would yell at her), her steely gentility (she was often compared to the Queen), and her distaste for introspection—indeed, at times, for truth. But that was just in life. Onstage, she told the truth.

Hip: The History, *by John Leland (HarperCollins; $26.95).* This ambitious history of an underground idea manages to string together Bugs Bunny, Gunnar Myrdal, and Walt Whitman in a vast counternarrative of American outsiders—slaves, transcendentalists, Beats, jazzmen, punk rockers, and hardboiled detectives. Jumping quickly (sometimes randomly) from subject to subject, Leland relates some illuminating historical anecdotes: Whitman told a friend that he had written "Leaves of Grass" as a "book for the criminal classes," because "the other people do not need a poet." What this all adds up to, however, is unclear. Too often, Leland gets bogged down attempting to tie everything together, declaring, for instance, that Bugs Bunny "set the principled rebellion of Emerson and Thoreau in a landscape of outrageous violence, shaped by a theology of humor and payback." Fortunately, the author's heroes offer more succinct explanations of hip, like Ralph Ellison's dictum "America is a land of masking jokers."

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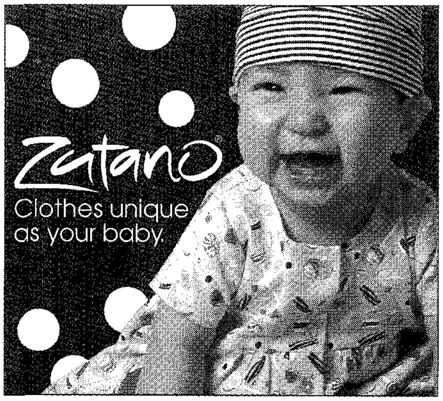

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BOOKS

THE PAINTING LIFE

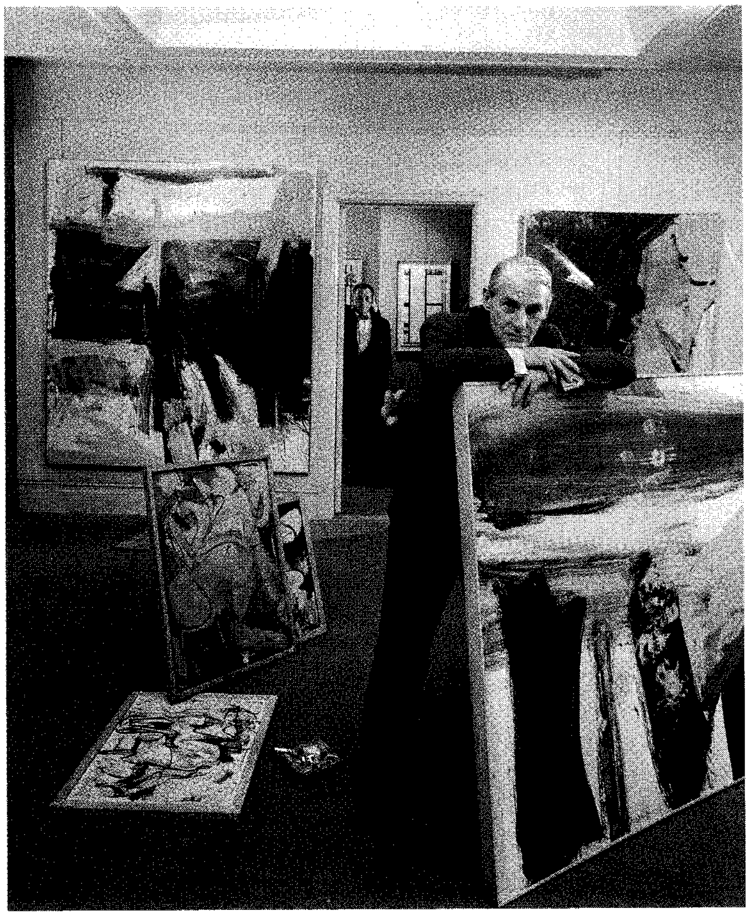
Looking again at Willem de Kooning.

BY PETER SCHJELDAHL

Willem de Kooning, the subject of “De Kooning: An American Master,” a wise and delectable biography (Knopf; $35) by Mark Stevens and Annalyn Swan, was the best pure painter of the twentieth century; the twenty-first will decide how much that matters. Over a seven-decade career of many phases marked, as with Picasso, by successive female lovers, de Kooning conjoined the intellectual clarities of drawing, the visual music of color, and the befuddling sensuousness of oil paint like no one else since Rubens. Other modern artists made more satisfying, resolved works. De Kooning's iconic “Woman I” (1950-52), which he reworked convulsively, and which still looks to be evolving, is only the most dramatic example of an art that is like a construction site where building up and tearing down are simultaneous activities. When is irresolution heroic? The painter's critical champion Harold Rosenberg held that “a refusal to be either recruited or pushed aside” made de Kooning “the outstanding artist of the ideological epoch in American art.” Actually, he was pretty roundly pushed aside in the contemporary art world for some thirty years as an anachronistic, ingenuous easel painter amid calculating game-players in novel forms and mediums. His individualism embarrassed an era of careful irony and corporate styles (Pop, minimalist, conceptual). Now he's back, posthumously. Every once persuasive reason for discounting his work has dimmed. The problem of how to value him—and, through him, painting for painting's sake—rankles anew.

De Kooning was angelically handsome, sincere, and witty. He was a jazzy, enchanting talker, who, riffing in his dense, amusing Dutch accent on Kierkegaard's notion of consciousness as the “trembling” of the spirit, expressed himself like this in a short speech to fellow-artists in 1949:

> In art, one idea is as good as another. If one takes the idea of trembling, for instance, all of a sudden most of art starts to tremble. Michelangelo starts to tremble. El Greco starts to tremble. All the impressionists start to tremble. The Egyptians are trembling invisibly and so do Vermeer and Giacometti and all of a sudden, for the time being, Raphael is languid and nasty; Cézanne was always trembling but very precisely.


De Kooning with the gallery owner Sidney Janis, in 1959.

ARNOLD NEWMAN/GETTY IMAGES

He spoke of art as he made it: from the inside. A number of biographical and historical factors help to explain this. He had an extraordinary grounding in technique as a youth in Rotterdam, but not until about 1933, in New York, seven years after immigrating as a stowaway on a British freighter, did he decide to think of himself as a fine artist. From his birth, in 1904, until the early nineteen-fifties, he lived, with scant respites, in poverty, sustained by resilient improvisation and Chaplinesque charm. Smart people wanted to know him. Self-possessed women among them found him irresistible. The idea that he was crudely misogynistic founders in the present biography, which turned up no former lover whose memories of him, however mixed, exclude fond affection. Lovers and friends alike tended to justify his narcissism. So did besotted strangers in the late fifties, when, with cultish intensity, his biographers write, “the New York scene jelled on de Kooning's doorstep.”

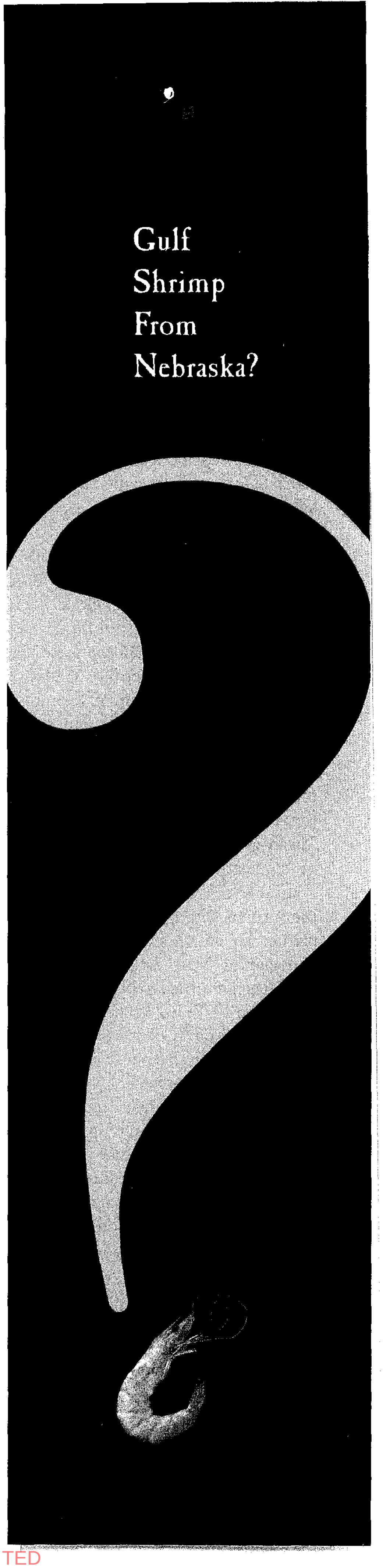
Stevens, the art critic of *New York*, and Swan, a veteran arts writer and editor, have achieved something rare that emerges gradually in this long but swift book: they explore what it was like to be de Kooning, and register the vicissitudes and effects of de Kooningness on intimates and on the culture at large. While profoundly sympathetic, the approach is without a whisper of hagiography. It expatiates on the title phrase “an American master,” vivifying a heady sense of Americanness, which de Kooning mythicized, and of mastery, which consumed him. Throughout, there is a thrum of destiny. De Kooning's career was at one with a wave of American temerity—overcoming old Europe in culture, as in war. I remember getting weepy with patriotic gratitude, at the Museum of Modern Art's de Kooning retrospective in 1969, when I encountered his first unmistakably great painting, “Pink Angels” (1945): a congeries of crackling lines and radiant, fleshy masses, pressurized in a shallow pictorial space like that of Cubism, but molten and singing. Here was proof, like a flag on high, that what I couldn’t help but be—American—was a stupendous stroke of luck. It meant living in the crux of history.

“Every immigrant is broken, sometimes beautifully,” the authors write in their introduction. That’s an ethically dubious sentiment—the aestheticizing of woe—but it is exactly to the point of de Kooning’s anguished Romanticism. He had a rough early life in the gritty, fast-growing port city of Rotterdam, as the fifth child, but only the second to survive, of a turbulent couple who separated when he was two years old and soon married others. His father, a beer distributor, was emotionally distant. His mother was a “fiery, impetuous, caustic” waterfront bartender who often beat de Kooning and his sister and relished, in all her relationships, “the dark pleasures of the long, drawn-out, and knock-down battle.” Between the ages of four and thirteen, de Kooning lived at twelve different addresses, in “a bewildering succession of households, parents, and small cold rooms lit by hot flashes of anger.” He was often off by himself, haunting the docks. He later recalled a moment when, at the age of seven or eight, he “stood alone looking at the water,” the authors write. “He became certain, he said, he would do something important in his life.”

Poverty exacerbated by harrowing privations during the First World War forced de Kooning, at the age of twelve, into apprenticeship with a prominent firm of decorators that specialized in Art Nouveau. Starting the next year, he was permitted breaks from his workweek, of eleven or twelve hours a day, every day except Sunday, to attend the Rotterdam Academy. He had good fortune in teachers and mentors. One of the former said, “Draw without ideas! Draw what you see, not what you think!” A single proper drawing, at the school, might take six months to complete. (Teaching briefly at Black Mountain College in 1948, de Kooning set up a still-life and told his class, “We’re going to spend all summer looking at this thing. On one piece of paper or one canvas and we’re going to look at it until we get it exactly the way it is. Then we’re going to keep working on it until we kill it. And then we’re going to keep working on it until it comes back on its own.” Several students—American kids, lacking Dutch pertinacity—fled.) One older friend pointed de Kooning toward Mondrian and Frank Lloyd Wright, another toward William Morris and the Pre-Raphaelites. Both men preached that crafts of decoration and illustration were every bit as honorable as fine art. (De Kooning called Mondrian “the best layout man in the universe.”) By the age of eighteen, the neophyte was lettering signs and designing movie posters and window displays. He was attracted to red-light districts and bohemian milieus. Loving Dostoyevsky, he prowled the streets, feeling, he said, like Raskolnikov.

One of de Kooning’s indelible first impressions of the United States came in the Hoboken ferry terminal: a counterman pouring coffee into a row of cups with a single motion. The loose-limbed exuberance of his new country thrilled him. He worked as a housepainter, a stage-set maker, a speakeasy decorator, and a window designer for shoe stores. He kept up with new art. (In 1927, the “beautiful cobalt violet” in a painting by Matisse transfixed him.) His first New York girlfriend, a vaudeville tightrope walker named Nini Diaz, overlapped with his second, Juliet Browner, a model and dancer, in a ménage à trois. (Browner later married Man Ray.) De Kooning’s affairs began in joyous infatuation, then succumbed to sullen restlessness and occasional furniture-smashing rage. Women put up with a lot then. The standard birth-control method was abortion. (In 1956, refusing to undergo another, de Kooning’s girlfriend Joan Ward had his only child, Lisa—whom he adored, albeit clumsily.) He lived in often unheated, cold-water apartments and lofts. Mad for music of all kinds—notably, jazz and Stravinsky—he spent seven hundred dollars, more than half of his annual income, on a premier record player. He met artists, including those he justly termed “the three smartest guys on the scene”—the polymathic Russian aristocrat John Graham, the dashing American Cubist Stuart Davis, and his most important artistic influence, Arshile Gorky.

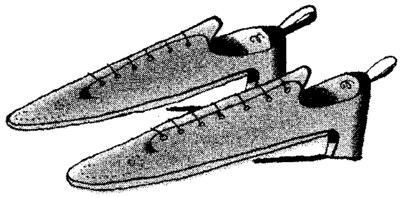
Stevens and Swan write, finely, “In



the 1930s de Kooning knew how to be modern. And he knew how to be a painter. But he did not know how to be a modern painter." He could draw like Ingres, as is plain in his benchmark "Self-Portrait with Imaginary Brother" (1938). He made subtly tortured paintings of melancholy men—Cubistic updates of the seventeenth-century Le Nain brothers—and destroyed nearly all of them, to his subsequent regret. (He explained, "I was so modest then that I was vain.") Short and compact, he tagged along with the tall, expansive Gorky—they put people in mind of Mutt and Jeff—to museums, galleries, and studios. They obsessed about Picasso and, later, Miró. De Kooning came to identify, soulfully, with the anxious, explosive, stubbornly figurative art of Chaim Soutine. He worked on W.P.A. murals, though in constant fear of deportation, as he was still in the country illegally. (He didn't become a citizen until 1962—two years before Lyndon Johnson presented him with the Presidential Medal of Freedom.) While scornful of Communism, he was swept up in demonstrations in Union Square. In 1938, he met Elaine Fried, a painter from Brooklyn fourteen years his junior. A "blushy tint," the authors observe, began to suffuse his "dusky gray paintings of men," followed by "a powerfully erupting pink."

Elaine de Kooning, who clung to the surname though she lived with the painter for only a few years after their marriage at New York's City Hall in 1943 (then returned to his life, as a caretaker, from 1977 until her death, in 1989), merits a biography of her own; she cuts a swath through this one. The daughter of a baker (like Raphael's La Fornarina) and a brilliant, deranged mother (like Gypsy Rose Lee), she grew up as a smart, funny, take-charge charmer who wasn't much as a painter but wrote well about art. She once said, "I was a lot of fun. I mean a *lot* of fun." De Kooning took six months off from painting to "build her the most beautiful house in the world," he bragged: a remodelled loft with a bedroom that was white on the outside and seashell pink within. They were soon evicted and moved to a small, grimy apartment on Carmine Street, where their relations soured. Disdaining housework, Elaine liked to quote a remark of de Kooning's when he surveyed their domestic chaos: "What we need is a wife." She had affairs with his first dealer, Charles Egan, and his two most devoted critics, Rosenberg and the influential editor of *ARTnews*, Thomas Hess. Fundamentally self-seeking, she had stirred de Kooning's first doubts about her by playing hard to get. He told a friend shortly before the wedding that if Elaine had married him the year before "I would have been so happy. But now, I think I've been had."

The book's meatiest chapters recount the slow rise, blazing triumph, and concatenating sorrows of the generation of Abstract Expressionism—in which de Kooning fit a mite awkwardly, because he never forsook hints of figuration. For years, the artists would gather at cafeterias and Automats, nurse five-cent cups of coffee, and talk through the night. One of them recalled that Jackson Pollock might drop by and "tell us what a bunch of idiots we all were, and then he'd leave." Pollock and de Kooning deeply admired each other, even when their respective followers and main critical proponents—Clement Greenberg and Rosenberg—fomented what Stevens and Swan rightly term "the ugliest and most vulgar quarrel of the 1950s." It pitted Pollock's "all-over" method, which dispensed with traditional standards of drawing and composition, against de Kooning's expressive virtuosity—as if the world were too small to accommodate both. Pollock, with a sensational show of drip paintings at Betty Parsons in 1949, had "broken the ice," de Kooning declared at the opening, ending the isolation of American artists. Pollock had already achieved local fame through Peggy Guggenheim's gallery, Art of This Century, and its audience of glittering European exiles. So had Gorky, who cruelly dropped the downtowner de Kooning in favor of André Breton, Marcel Duchamp, and other uptown celebrities; but de Kooning never had an ill word to say of him. When his mind faltered, in the eighties, his hand resorted to formal ideas that he had shared with Gorky.



Franz Kline, a Clark Gable-handsome, dazzling barroom wit who at one point subsisted by doing caricatures in the street for twenty-five cents, became de Kooning's best friend. De Kooning showed him how to use an opaque projector to transfer the small abstract drawings that Kline was making to large canvases. Together, in the late forties, they bought gallons of cheap commercial black and zinc-white enamel paint. With this austere palette, de Kooning produced effects of whiteness as the shadow of black light in the jostling, runny, supercharged abstractions—"Zurich," "Painting," "Light in August"—that filled his first solo show, when he was not quite forty-four years old, at Egan, in April, 1948. Nothing sold. But Greenberg published a rave in *The Nation*, and de Kooning's downtown renown swelled. He was the star of a new institution, the Club, on East Eighth Street, where artists met weekly for free-form discussions, lectures, and the occasional concert. The philosopher William Barrett, associated with *Partisan Review*, recalled the response to a performance of the Juilliard String Quartet: "There was a thunder of applause at the end, and Willem de Kooning leaped to his feet and presented the musicians with his latest opus, a lovely black-and-white wash drawing, amid a burst of more applause—this time for the picture itself."

At the very moment of his first public coup—MOMA's Alfred Barr chose his mid-century masterpiece, "Excavation," for the Venice Biennale of 1950—de Kooning effectively opted to prolong his obscurity and his penury by plunging into the ordeal of "Woman I," a grimly hilarious apparition that feeds on a fury of strokes that are delivered like blows, and which, among other things, turned Greenberg against him. The perverse hysteria of de Kooning's scrimmage with "the female painted through all the ages, all those idols," as he put it, is the core riddle of his career. Stevens and Swan worry it gamely, from angles including that of the then recent debacle of the artist's marriage and some flailing psychoanalysis. ("De Kooning's mother did not like to touch children, except for public show, which may help explain why he had such difficulty depicting hands.") I adduce a crisis in the face of

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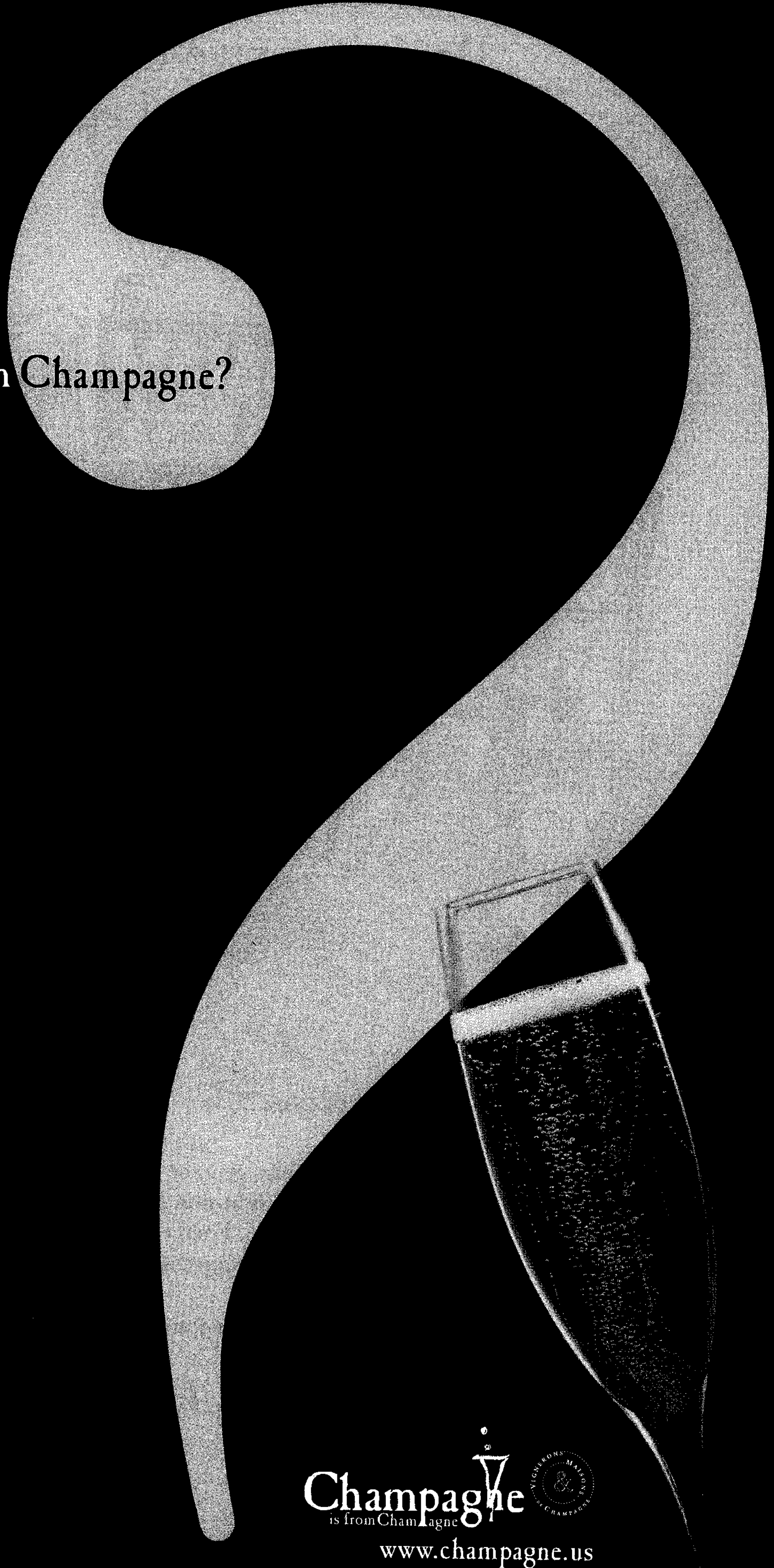

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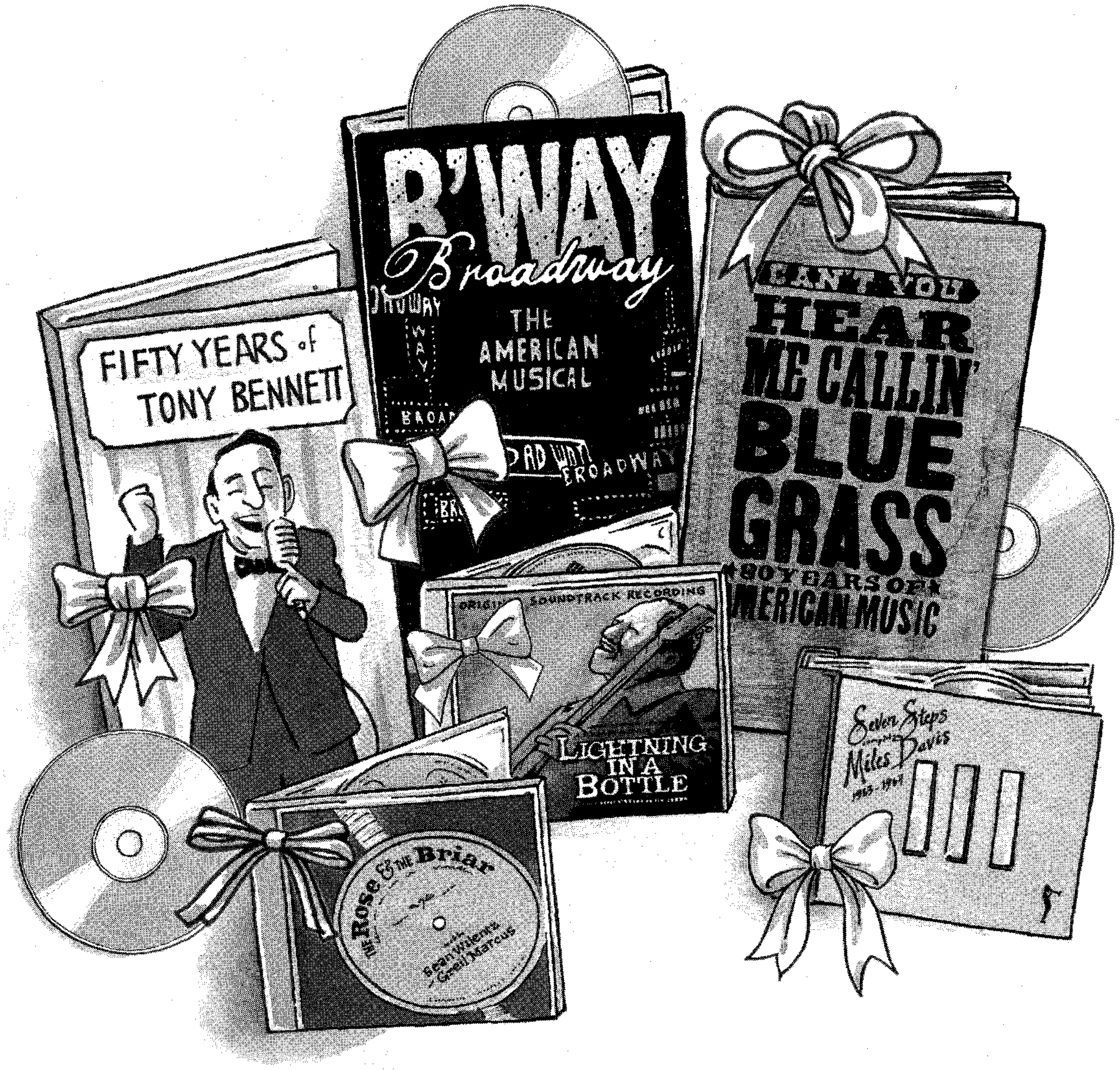

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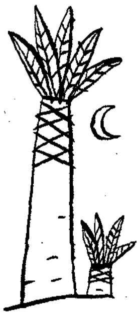
success. The cocoon of his self-regard, sustained by close associates, was being ripped open to what Auden, in another connection, called "a foreign code of conscience." He fell back upon the wellspring of his sincerity, which was turbid with contending ambition and fear and erotic longing and bitterness. In early 1952, in despair, he tore the painting off its support and tossed it in the trash outside his studio, on Fourth Avenue. At that moment, the great art historian Meyer Schapiro came to call. In history's luckiest studio visit, his enthusiasm for the picture set de Kooning free.

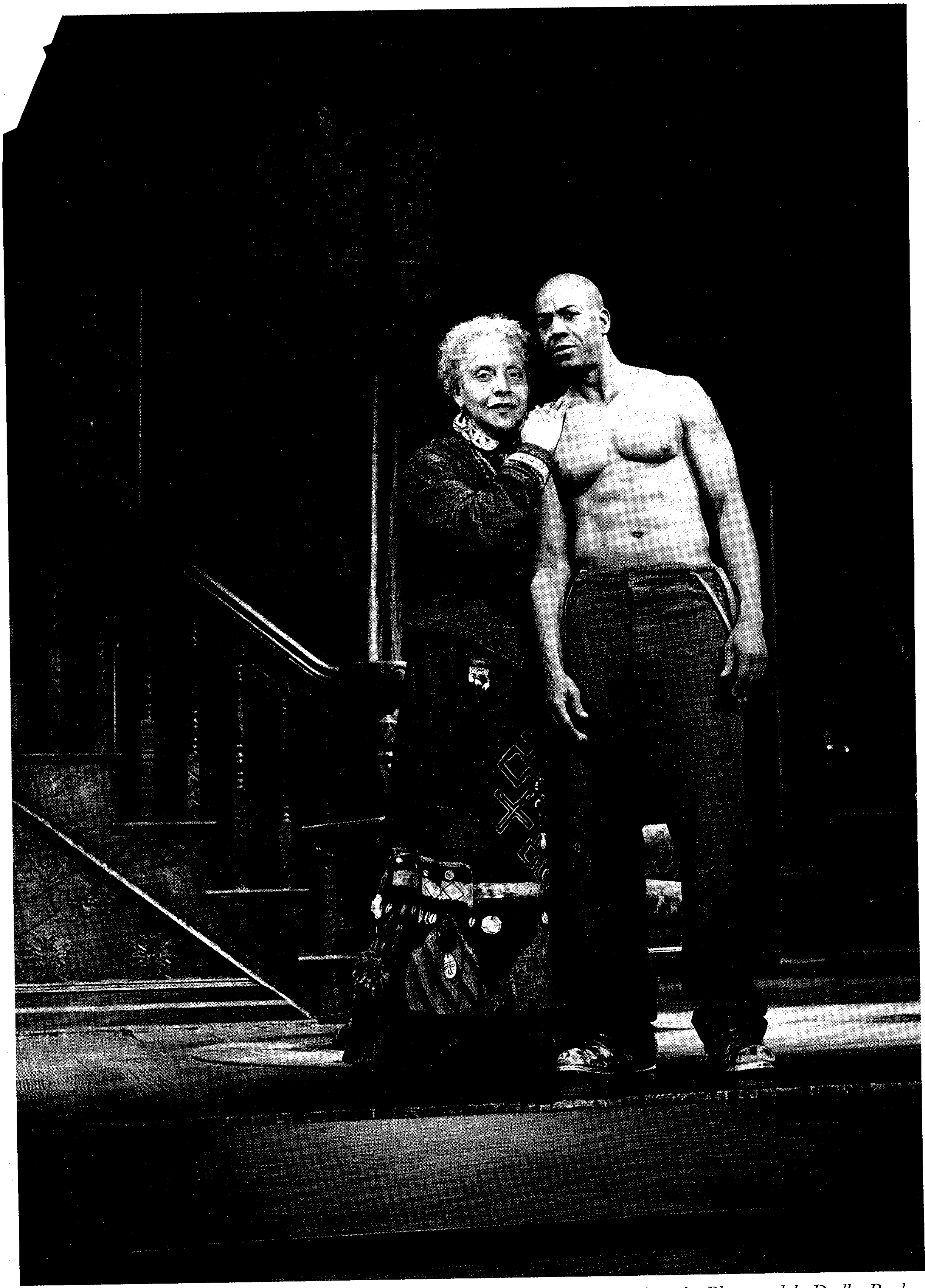
De Kooning's works of the fifties—subsequent "Women," urban abstractions ("Gotham News," "Easter Monday"), and abstract "highway" landscapes (inspired by ever more frequent trips to the Hamptons, on which the artist, who never drove, was a fascinated passenger)—are his showiest, as he develops ways of transposing his superlative draftsmanship into plangent gestures of thick paint. His life got wild. Formerly temperate, he started drinking heavily. He held court almost nightly at the Cedar Tavern. He assigned his numerous girlfriends distinguishing rings of his door buzzer. He shocked the scene by taking up with Ruth Kligman, who had been in the car crash that killed Pollock, her lover, in 1956. Zestfully vulgar, a figure of "va-va-voom flamboyance," the authors write, Kligman delighted de Kooning. In Rome in 1959, for the only time in his life, he indulged in high living with her on a grand scale. That same year, he made a startlingly cynical remark: "I'm selling my own image now. It's being understood. That's the way it's supposed to be." Catastrophe ensued, brought on by increasingly dire alcoholic binges, during which he might disappear for days. He liked carousing with workmen on the South Street waterfront. One day, a friend saw a drunk on the Bowery "mumbling to himself. . . . He had literally slept in the gutter. Covered with dirt." It was de Kooning. A revolution in taste dethroned him in favor of Andy Warhol, whom he called "Andy Asshole"—though the two working-class wizards had audacities in common. (Pop was incipient in de Kooning's work of the fifties.) De Kooning abandoned the city for the Springs.

The next stage of de Kooning's life revolves around a studio, a majestic and eccentric building with an inverted, "butterfly" roof that was five years in construction. He lived off and on with Joan Ward and their daughter. With a young and elegant new girlfriend, the dancer Susan Brockman, he shared eight houses in two years, while his studio was being built and, never quite right, rebuilt. He made wonderful though atypically low-key art in experimental, woodshedding veins: concocting ingenious paint mediums (such as safflower oil, water, and benzine), drawing left-handed or with his eyes closed, painting winsome nudes (some on doors rejected for the studio) in tender and shimmering colors, and producing superb sculpture and lithographs. He bicycled constantly to the shore; he could not get enough of gazing into the watery light. Concentration returned in the late sixties, issuing in sexy, sumptuous pictures that knitted figures and landscape. In 1970, he met his last mistress, Emilie Kilgore, who was married to a rich Houston businessman. His love letters to her are gorgeous. "I was on my bike to the bay and had a look at the back of your neck there," he wrote; and, comparing her effect on him to his memories of the waters of Rotterdam, "With you I find places of the past to take the hardness out of me." (As sometimes happened with de Kooning's women, Kilgore and Elaine became friends, resigned to their separate roles in his life.)



De Kooning's abstractions of the seventies are the most dizzying displays of painterly improvisation in art history—tumultuous updates of the pastoral, the authors argue persuasively, whose surging and dodging strokes describe nature in a language "of verbs, not nouns." Those of the eighties are the strangest, often featuring slowly unfurling ribbons of primary color that grope, in fields of scorching whiteness, toward an impossible, paradisal resolution, as for a lost chord. They are good to look at, but how good are they? Stevens and Swan comment, apropos Alzheimer's-like dissociation, "De Kooning's late work has the misfortune of being judged by those who have never been to the country where it was made." Of course, he was a money cow for Elaine and his dealer Xavier Fourcade, who concealed his deteriorating state in a "compa protective secrecy," in the words of curator and critic Robert Storr. A welcome guest, in spells of lucidity, was Paul McCartney, whose wife, Linda, was the daughter of de Kooning's lawyer, Lee Eastman. Before darkness descended, the painter enjoyed a tête-à-tête with Queen Beatrix of the Netherlands—"pretty cute for a queen," he decided. (The Rotterdam Academy has been renamed the Willem de Kooning Academy.) Studio assistants took an increasing hand in aiding him to work, such as by copying parts of his drawings onto blank canvases, and laying out paints in bizarre colors. The result, the authors write, is a vexing body of "de Koonings with an asterisk." He made his last brushstroke in 1990, and died in 1997, at the age of ninety-two.

"The universe gives me the creeps," de Kooning had said to Elaine, breaking off their contemplation of a night sky at Black Mountain. He required boundaries to rebel against. His life played out love-hate feelings toward his mother and bittersweet nostalgia for his knockabout youth. He was a paradigmatic figure for American art circa the Second World War: the immigrant genius laying the treasures of the Old World in the lap of the New, whose vernacular energies he absorbed and glorified. ("Zowie!" Kligman remarked, in 1957, on first seeing a new painting, which de Kooning promptly titled "Ruth's Zowie.") America had only temporary use for that story. Pollock's native-born sublime excited a culture that valued impersonal power, and the professionalized and academized artists of the sixties delivered in abundance. A certain weightlessness thus attends de Kooning's later reputation, which has only supreme artistic quality as ballast. He came to be alone with his dreams when he made his work, after the fifties; and you must accept being alone with yours when you look at it. Stevens and Swan don't just embroider that encounter, in the way of most artists' biographers, but inform and electrify it. To read the book is to spend hours in the company of the most interesting of men, ever on the threshold of moments when mere interest dissolves into hot, stammering creative bliss. ♦



Phylicia Rashad and John Earl Jelks in a play that takes as its subject the shock of freedom's strain. Photograph by Dudley Reed.

THE THEATRE

TROUBLED WATERS

August Wilson's "Gem of the Ocean."

BY JOHN LAHR

"What one begs the American people to do, for all of us, is simply to accept our history," James Baldwin wrote in "The American Dream and the American Negro." But that imaginative challenge, as August Wilson demonstrates in "Gem of the Ocean" (well directed by Kenny Leon, at the Walter Kerr), is as hard for blacks to achieve as for whites. "Gem," which is set in the Hill District of Pittsburgh, in 1904, is the latest, and the introductory, installment to Wilson's magnificent ten-play cycle, in which each play dramatizes a decade of the roiling African-American experience of the twentieth century. At one point, Solly Two Kings (Anthony Chisholm), an old runaway slave and activist, asks Citizen Barlow (John Earl Jelks), a young man born into freedom and named for its promise, "You know about the Civil War?" He doesn't. History is lost on him; in fact, he is the first of many stunned characters who are "left over from history." The moment—a reminder of the depths of African-American impoverishment—is a sensational theatrical fillip; it is incidental to the plot but crucial to the spiritual dilemma the play addresses. Citizen Barlow has only just come North to find work and to fulfill the destiny of liberty; he stands before us in all his woe and wonder, already unmoored by the experience. He's freed from bondage but finds himself in economic slavery at the local mill. As payback for the mill's refusal to grant his wages, he steals a bucket of nails; another worker, who is blamed for the theft, drowns himself rather than be forced to admit guilt. Citizen has murder on his conscience. "I feel like I got a hole inside me," he explains. Wilson depicts Barlow as a by-product of the system of subjugation that stripped African-Americans of their language, their gods, their history, and their sense of reality. "Gem" bears witness to this historical mutilation, which leaves Citizen Barlow rudderless in a way that is particular to the African-American. As Baldwin writes, "It destroys the father's authority over him. His father can no longer tell him anything because his past has disappeared." Wilson's eloquent feat is to repossess African-American history and mythology and to make luminous the heroic African-American accomplishment of survival.

As the play opens, Citizen Barlow bursts into the high-ceilinged home of Aunt Ester Tyler (Phylicia Rashad), a two-hundred-and-eighty-five-year-old conjure woman who is the repository of the race's historical memory, and who is rumored to "wash people's souls." Aunt Ester embodies African-American folklore, what Zora Neale Hurston calls "the boiled-down juice of human living." Ester's house, at 1839 Wylie Avenue—an address as iconic in dramatic literature as Grover's Corners—is a sanctuary in Wilson's "Two Trains Running" (1990), and in "King Hedley II" (2001), in which Aunt Ester dies of grief. However, at the beginning of the twentieth century she is in robust, cranky health, pestering her housekeeper and protégée, Black Mary (Lisagay Hamilton), with orders and speaking in parables full of wisdom from the journey she made in 1619 on the Middle Passage, the transatlantic route on which at least two million slaves lost their lives. "I'm on an adventure," she tells Citizen. She goes on, "I got a strong memory. I got a long memory. . . . I try to remember out loud. I keep my memories alive. I feed them. I got to feed them, otherwise they'd eat me up. I got memories that go way back. I'm carrying them for a lot of folk."

Aunt Ester's mission is Wilson's mission: to transmit into Citizen's soul a sense of his past. She, like him, does this by creating a piece of theatre that throws Citizen back in time. In this case, she fashions a boat from her slave's bill of sale, which Citizen clutches in his hand, and, aided by Black Mary and her gatekeeper and friend, Eli (Eugene Lee),

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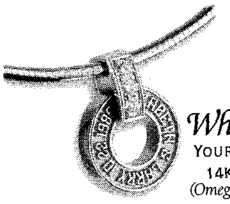

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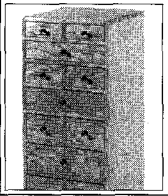

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conjures up the slave ships and the City of Bones, an underwater world made from the bones of drowned slaves, which is first mentioned in Wilson's masterpiece, "Joe Turner's Come and Gone" (1986). The extravagant theatricality of Citizen's re-spiritualization is powerful stuff, even if it seems to be willed by the author rather than to flow organically from the situation. Nonetheless, Wilson superbly clinches Aunt Ester's ability to engineer identity when Black Mary finally rounds on her after being given one too many orders, and says, "I'm tired of it! Your way ain't always the best way. I got my own way, and that's the way I'm doing it. If I stay around here, I'm doing it my own way." Aunt Ester asks, "What took you so long?" and exits.

As Ester, Phylicia Rashad turns in an eerily inspired performance of old age. (She did the same thing last year on Broadway, in "A Raisin in the Sun.") She has abdicated glamour and the desire to be adorable; as a result, detachment and coyness give way to daring and compassion. Dressed in Constanza Romero's beautifully designed, capacious purple knit dress, with a hem decorated in amulets that suggest majesty and magic, Aunt Ester speaks her own compelling metaphoric language. She tells Citizen,"You got to find a way to live in truth. If you live right you die right." It says a lot about the conviction of Rashad's big-hearted performance, and about Wilson's writing, that her authority is never in doubt.

"Freedom is heavy. You got to put your shoulder to freedom," a character says in Wilson's "Two Trains Running," and the shock of freedom's strain is the real subject of "Gem of the Ocean." Solly Two Kings, whose walking stick has sixty-two notches for the people he has led out of slavery, knows the price of freedom, and carries a link of his own ankle chain as a reminder. "The people think they in freedom. That's all my daddy talked about. He died and never did have it," Solly Two Kings tells Citizen. "I say I got it but what is it?" He adds, "You got to fight to make it mean something. All it mean is you got a long row to hoe and ain't got no plow. Ain't got no seed. Ain't got no mule. What good is freedom if you can't do nothing with it?"

Against this activist position—the sure knowledge that you have to bleed for freedom—Wilson pits a local constable, the well-named Caesar (Ruben Santiago-Hudson), who adopts the white man's momentum as completely as he absorbs his laws. It gives him direction and definition. In Santiago-Hudson's wonderful peacock swagger, Caesar is a man whose successful survival has been achieved at the expense of his own people and his own past. In him, the Bible has been replaced by the rule book. He is the hectoring, and incidentally hilarious, voice of reaction. "You know whose fault it is? I'll tell you whose fault it is," he says, storming into Aunt Ester's house with news of a riot over the stolen nails, which threatens to close the mill down. "It's Abraham Lincoln's fault. He ain't had no idea what he was doing. He didn't know like I know. Some of these niggers was better off in slavery. They don't know how to act otherwise." Santiago-Hudson, whose talk and look are sleek and urban, strides the stage with his badge and his gun, asserting the white man's authority. He catches every iota of irony in Caesar's messianic belief that he must keep his own race in line. By the finale, Caesar has lost his soul just as surely as Citizen has found his. "I'm a free man," Caesar says, spelling out the bright idea of property and the pragmatism that justifies it. "I'm starting out with nothing so I got to get a little something. A little place to start."

"Gem of the Ocean" is perhaps more discursive than Wilson's other plays; the characters seem to circle around themselves and their meanings, but that is appropriate for people who are literally assembling new identities and learning to pronounce them in a new world. Each character brings news of a brutalized life; each character is in search of a meaning but, in his incompleteness, is also, in Wilson's words, "fat with substance." Next year, "Radio Golf," the final installment in Wilson's cycle, will be staged. Whether it succeeds or not, his herculean accomplishment, for the range and depth of its eloquence, is without peer in its time. Whatever its excesses and longueurs, Wilson's cycle is one of the high-water marks of American drama, transmuting historical tragedy into imaginative triumph. Wilson sees his storytelling as some kind of blues; "Gem of the Ocean," like the rest of his œuvre, blows loud and clear and beautiful—it's some kind of song that contains what Wilson calls "both a wail and a whelp of joy." ♦

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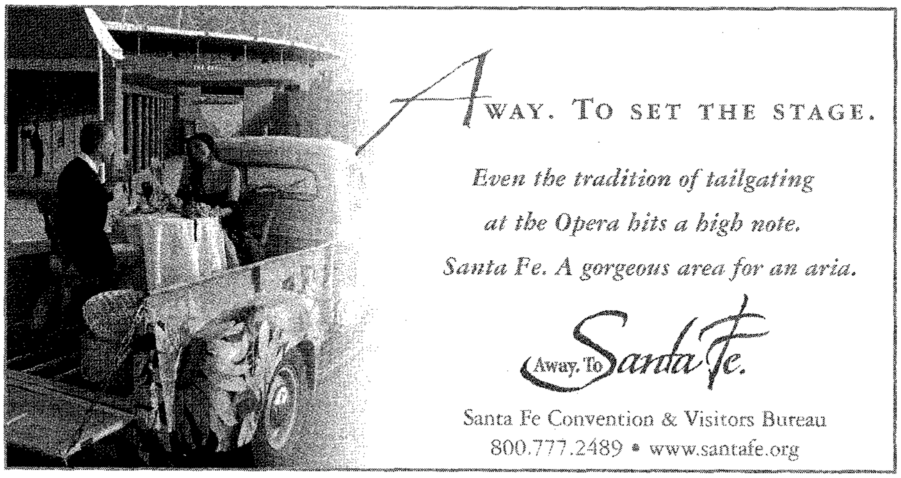

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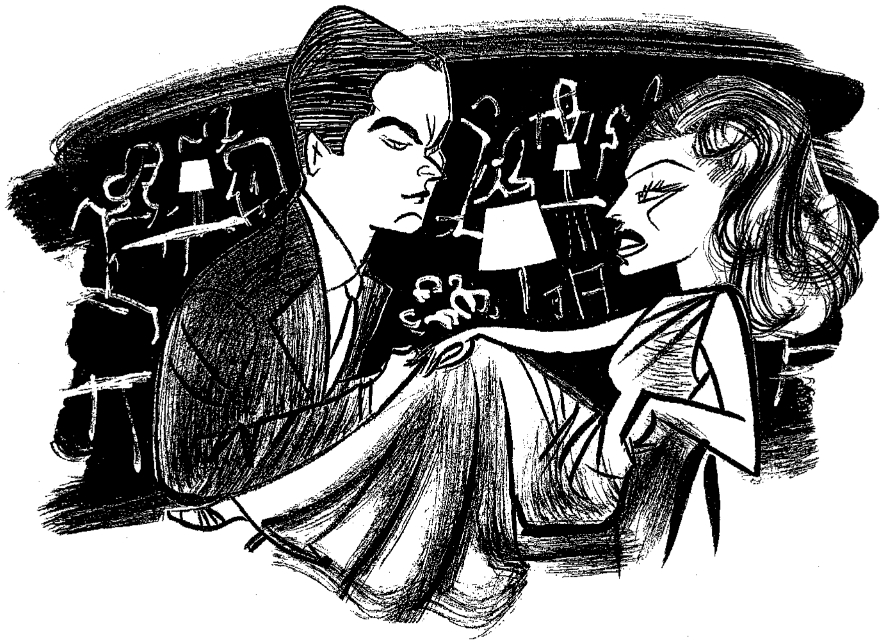
"The Aviator," "Million Dollar Baby," "Hotel Rwanda."

BY DAVID DENBY

Howard Hughes the billionaire madman, the taloned hermit of Las Vegas, eating nothing but steak and peas, and guarding his sealed penthouse in shoes made of Kleenex boxes—that was the pop-culture lunatic, the haggard face in the tabloids we knew in the years before his death, in 1976. Martin Scorsese's brilliantly entertaining "The Aviator" goes back before that period, to the years when Hughes (Leonardo DiCaprio) was a handsome and flamboyant young man. In 1924, at the age of eighteen, Hughes inherited a fortune that his father had made in the Houston oil business, and by the time he was twenty-two (when the movie picks up his story) he was already a brash player in the country's two hottest industries—aviation, still in its daredevil phase, and Hollywood at the end of the silent period, when people making movies realized with a happy sigh that the pleasant job of entertaining a nation came with a lot of easy sex. Hughes produced and directed pictures, designed and flew airplanes, slept with dozens of beautiful starlets and actresses. The movie is a fantasia about a studly capitalist prince—a fantasia darkened at the end, in the nineteen-forties, by ghoulish intimations of the bad times to come. "The Aviator," I suppose, is Scorsese's "Citizen Kane," but it's a portrait made without Welles's malicious satirical spirit. The movie is not an exposé of Hughes (what's left to expose?) but a rehabilitation and celebration.



Leonardo DiCaprio and Cate Blanchett in Martin Scorsese's new movie.

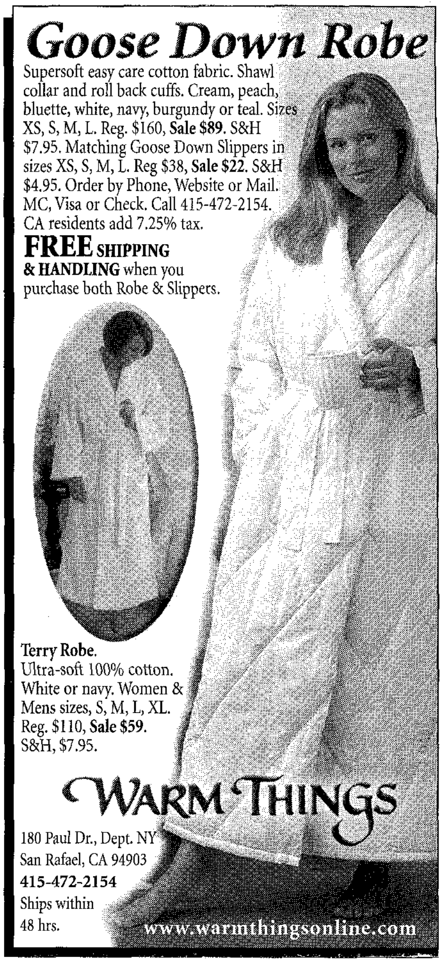
TOM BACHTELL

Recovering from the grisly street theatrics of "Gangs of New York," Scorsese, working with the screenwriter John Logan, invites us to enter the dream life of the nation: the silver, single-wing airplane that Hughes creates in the thirties, with its narrow, tubelike fuselage, is a chic vision of elegance; the aerial sequences, enhanced by digital painting, frankly acknowledge our desire for beauty and rapturous excess in the sky. As his camera swoops down from the ceiling in the lost-in-wonder style of old movie musicals, Scorsese returns again and again to his re-creation of the Cocoanut Grove, in the Ambassador Hotel, a movie-titan playland adorned by willing playmates. Hughes seduces a cigarette girl by slipping his hand under her spangled tutu. Errol Flynn (Jude Law) stumbles in drunkenly and makes lewd remarks, which depresses the young Howard, who is certainly interested in sex but dislikes loose talk. In his middle twenties, Hughes is an arrogant but appealing plutocrat who does everything by instinct. Always in motion, he hires and fires people on the spot. He throws millions into his aerial-warfare epic, "Hell's Angels," then reshoots most of it when sound comes in. Wearing a Stetson, instead of a hood and goggles, he tests his own aircraft and gets so giddy when aloft that he twice runs out of fuel. The first time, he crash-lands harmlessly in a beet field. The second, he shears off the tops of houses in Beverly Hills, panicking the people making lunch in their kitchens below. The sequence, which seems prolonged well beyond real time by Scorsese's amazement, is actually quite funny—up to its flaming end, that is, when Hughes nearly dies.

In a burst of awed amusement, Scorsese hypes his subject, and I trust that no one will take the narrative as literal truth. For instance, did Hughes really decide in an instant to buy a majority shareholder's position in T.W.A.? What's important is that the hero looks like a hero: Scorsese and the production designer Dante Ferretti press the young tycoon into the svelte Art Deco motifs of the period, and Hughes, in tuxedos and casual beige flying duds, becomes the pictorial embodiment of restless bravado. He never utters an interesting sentence—when he's not talking about airplanes, he's barely articulate—but his speedy grasp of the industrial future and his willingness to act on what he foresees are a form of wit. DiCaprio, in pomaded and severely parted black hair, has the smile and flashing eyes for Hughes's more vaunting moments. Yet he portrays this blinkered egotist without displaying any narcissism of his own. He keeps a firm grip on the character's inner terrors—his habit of receding into himself, his appalling torments and phantoms, his weirdly impersonal relations with women.

Hughes is attracted to the movie-star glow of the young Katharine Hepburn (Cate Blanchett), and has an affair with her, but he doesn't show the slightest interest in who she is as a person or in what she's doing as an actress. Blanchett's angular bones conform at slightly different angles from Hepburn's, but she does a nervy, high-spirited imitation of the Hepburn manner—the forced laugh and toss of the head, the stentorian declarations, the mixture of ardent sympathy and calculating ambition. Apart from a few romantic moments and a scene in which Hepburn tells Hughes that they must shield their eccentricities from the public, they never quite mesh. It's Scorsese and Logan's point that Hughes never meshed with anyone. As he gets older, he builds unflyable airplanes and periodically withdraws, bearded and naked, into his germ-haunted paranoia. Meanwhile, a pair of tormentors try to move in for the kill—Juan Trippe (Alec Baldwin), the head of T.W.A.'s rival airline, Pan American, and Trippe's flunky, the corrupt Maine senator Owen Brewster (Alan Alda), who investigates contracts that Hughes held with the government during the war. There's an air of valedictory sadness about Hughes's successful 1947 appearance before Brewster's committee—it's the last moment, we're meant to feel, in which he is completely on top of his game. In a heroic age, the gods might have taken him when he was still young; in the media age, he lived on for decades as a comic grotesque. "The Aviator" superbly demonstrates, with abundant humor and obvious sympathy, that this very odd bird once soared on golden wings.

The best boxing movies—Robert Rossen's "Body and Soul" (1947), John Huston's "Fat City" (1972), Scorsese's "Raging Bull" (1980)—have a special redolence that is as easily recognizable, and as richly satisfying, as the leather-and-manure aroma of a stable. If you hang out in a place like that, you love the stink. Most of the characters in Clint Eastwood's "Million Dollar Baby," which joins the honor list of great fight films, live in a sweat-stained Los Angeles gym known as the Hit Pit. Time has stopped in this downtown relic, where encrusted veterans train a few serious fighters and many hapless punks, all of them clamoring for a match. "Boxing is about respect," someone says—respect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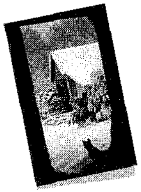
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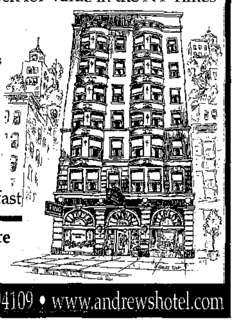

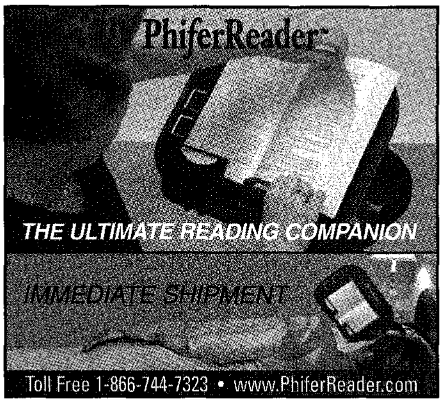

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wrung from endless curdled jokes. You had your chance, you blew it, but at least you were lucky enough to *get* a chance—that's the kind of respect you get at the Hit Pit, where the morose sarcasm is softened only by the harshest pity. The hero of the movie, which was adapted by the screenwriter Paul Haggis from a story in F. X. Toole's "Rope Burns," is Frankie Dunn (Clint Eastwood), a fight manager with guilty memories of mismanaged fights. Dunn, who owns the gym, was once a "cut man"—the guy who stanches the flow of blood between rounds with adrenaline chloride and Q-Tips, and keeps the fight going. That's what the movie is about—how you keep going, when all you've got is the memory of hope. Frankie's partner at the gym is Scrap (Morgan Freeman), an ex-fighter with one functioning eye. Having worked together for decades, Frankie and Scrap rag each other in affectionately nasty, deadpan exchanges, Eastwood in his hoarsely fluent croak, Freeman in his noble baritone.

Scrap is the first to notice a tough country woman hanging out at the gym—Maggie Fitzgerald (Hilary Swank), who whomps the heavy bag with rhythmless ardor. Swank has a big, downturned mouth that brightens into a toothy smile and the kind of bottom-dog gumption that's hard to say no to. Her Maggie wants to be trained by Frankie, who, despite urging from Scrap, resists her—he doesn't train girls, and he doesn't want an emotional connection with anyone. All this changes, of course, and "Million Dollar Baby" takes an inspirational, almost miraculous, turn as Maggie, under Frankie's tutelage, becomes the most skillful fighter in the sordid but lucrative world of women's boxing. The movie's emotional transactions are borderline trite: Frankie, miserably estranged from his own daughter, will melt and fall in (paternal) love with his new fighter. Maggie, who describes herself as "trailer trash from the Ozarks," will get her shot at the title and redeem a family life of mortifying squalor. But Eastwood and Freeman together absolve "Million Dollar Baby" of easy sentiment. Freeman narrates, in acrid tones, and, as he talks, we realize that the story is something *told*, a bit of a fable, a tall tale even, and more moving for that. And Eastwood, while

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going beyond his usual glare and wince, doles out his feelings slowly, parsimoniously, with powerful restraint. The movie turns again, this time toward disaster, but holds to fight-world stoicism right down to the last shot. "Million Dollar Baby" has a beautifully modulated sadness that's almost musical. Eastwood once made a movie about Charlie Parker ("Bird"), but this picture has the smoothly melancholic tones of Coleman Hawkins at his greatest.

Paul Rusesabagina (Don Cheadle), the Rwandan manager of the four-star Hôtel des Mille Collines, in Kigali, wears a suit and tie and is very polite, even deferential, to everyone. He works for a Belgian company that owns the hotel, which has become an oasis for Europeans and for African élites. A clever, proud, and opportunistic charmer, not always truthful, Paul, the hero of the stirring "Hotel Rwanda," relies on a complicated system of local payoffs, favors, and strategic friendships to run the hotel. When the Hutu massacres of the Tutsi minority begin, in the spring of 1994, Paul, the perfect employee, works his contacts and keeps the Mille Collines open. But on the sly he makes it a haven for both Hutu and Tutsi fugitives, keeping them momentarily safe from the machete-wielding militia who kill eight hundred thousand people in a few weeks.

"Hotel Rwanda," which was written by Keir Pearson and Terry George, who also directed, is the true story of a brave and wily man who never made a speech or indulged an instant of stiff-backed righteousness. The fascination of the movie lies in watching this unspectacular, mild-tempered fellow outwit some of the worst thugs and profiteers who ever managed to deliver their own country into disaster. Working in Rwanda and South Africa, George has put together a large-scale production. He convincingly stages the horrors outside the hotel—the paralyzing fear in the night, the vilely inciting radio broadcasts, the anguished ineffectiveness of the United Nations, the chaos and arbitrary madness of slaughter. But the dramatic life of "Hotel Rwanda" is centered in the character of Paul Rusesabagina. Abandoned in a crisis by the Europeans—the people he has always catered to—Paul, though increasingly desperate, holds to his temperamental equanimity, his belief in civility. Violence, for him, would be a defeat. The film turns into a triumph for Don Cheadle, who never steps outside the character for emotional grandstanding or easy moralism. In all, I can hardly think of another movie in which sheer intelligence and decency have been made to seem so attractive or effective. ♦

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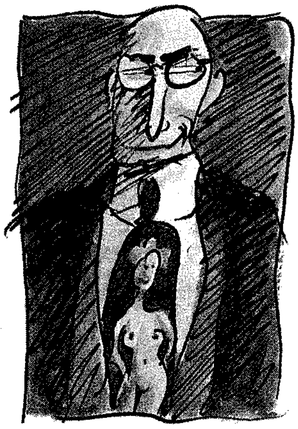
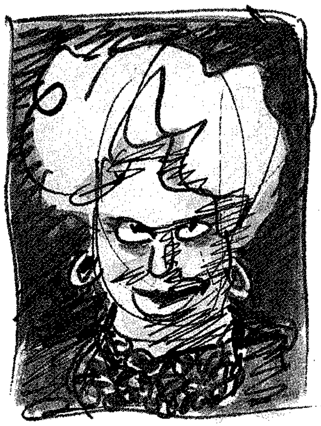
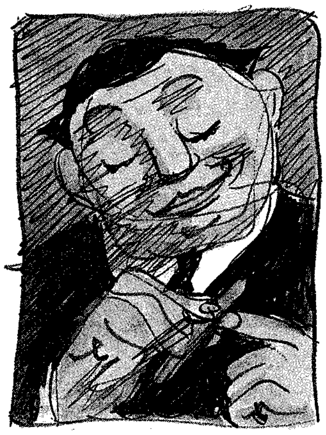






Fayette Pinckney, former Kentucky state attorney general. Believes single women are a threat to the sanctity of marriage and has been censured for preëmptively seizing them. Quote from the South Texas College of Law 1964 yearbook: "Sure, I believe in a woman's right—to bare arms!"

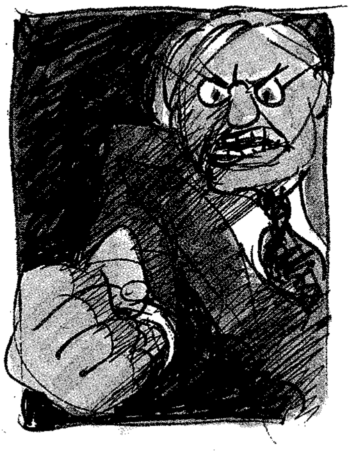
Marvin Cardozo, Florida Supreme Court. As a litigator in private practice, authored an amicus brief for the plaintiff (City of Key West v. Pamela Dowd) charging the defendant with treason for erecting a crèche scene on her lawn which included Snow White, Pinocchio, and Louis Armstrong, a tableau said to give "aid and comfort" to enemies of the United States already convinced that "the nation is incubating an army of clown infidels." Rated "highly competent" by the First Church of Armageddon.

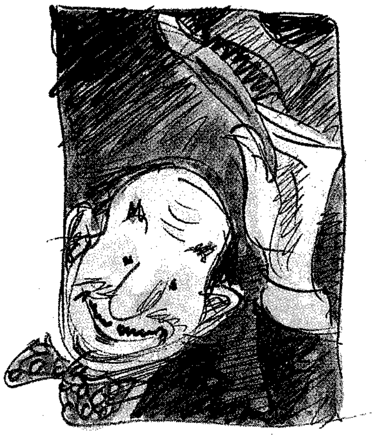
Pearl Juke-Kallikak, Nye County District Court, Nevada. In PTA v. Board of Education, parents sued over misuse of school funds. Teachers testified that students were dropping out from the stress of constant bake sales and the need to make their own textbooks out of felt. The judge found for the district in a case that has rallied parents nationally. Juke-Kallikak was put on a judicial fast track in 1991 by former President Bush when she wrote a memo for the U.S.D.A. showing how lead could be construed as a vegetable.

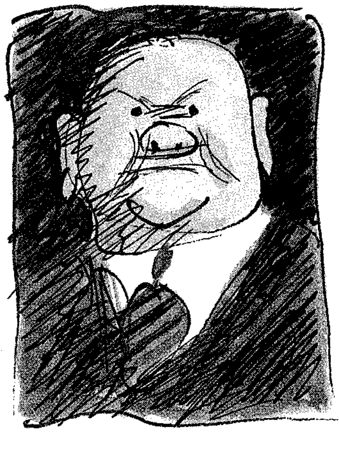
Franklin B. Hawser, Idaho District Court. Strict textualist is said after a few highballs to interpret Article IV, Section 4 ("The United States shall guarantee to every State in this Union a Republican Form of Government . . ."), to mean the Democratic Party should be outlawed. Known for cutting up in court and using a squeaky toy gavel.

Duncan Wabash, Yell County Circuit Court, Arkansas. As the first lawyer to successfully employ the "Twinkie defense" on behalf of a corporation (Wells et al. v. Deutsche Neuralgikon, Inc.), argued that the company suffered from diminished capacity stemming from depression on account of low employee morale, and was therefore not guilty of laying off plaintiffs on the eve of their becoming vested in their pensions. Strongly endorsed by the entire Wabash clan.

Cotton Ng, Missouri Eastern District Court. Overturned a lower-court judgment (Osage Springs v. Cozy Sow Ranch) requiring a hog farmer to pay a fine for pollution of the water table, saying the earlier decision was violative of the hogs' right to privacy. On appeal, the Eighth Circuit Court found the argument without merit, and the ruling was unanimously reversed on its face.







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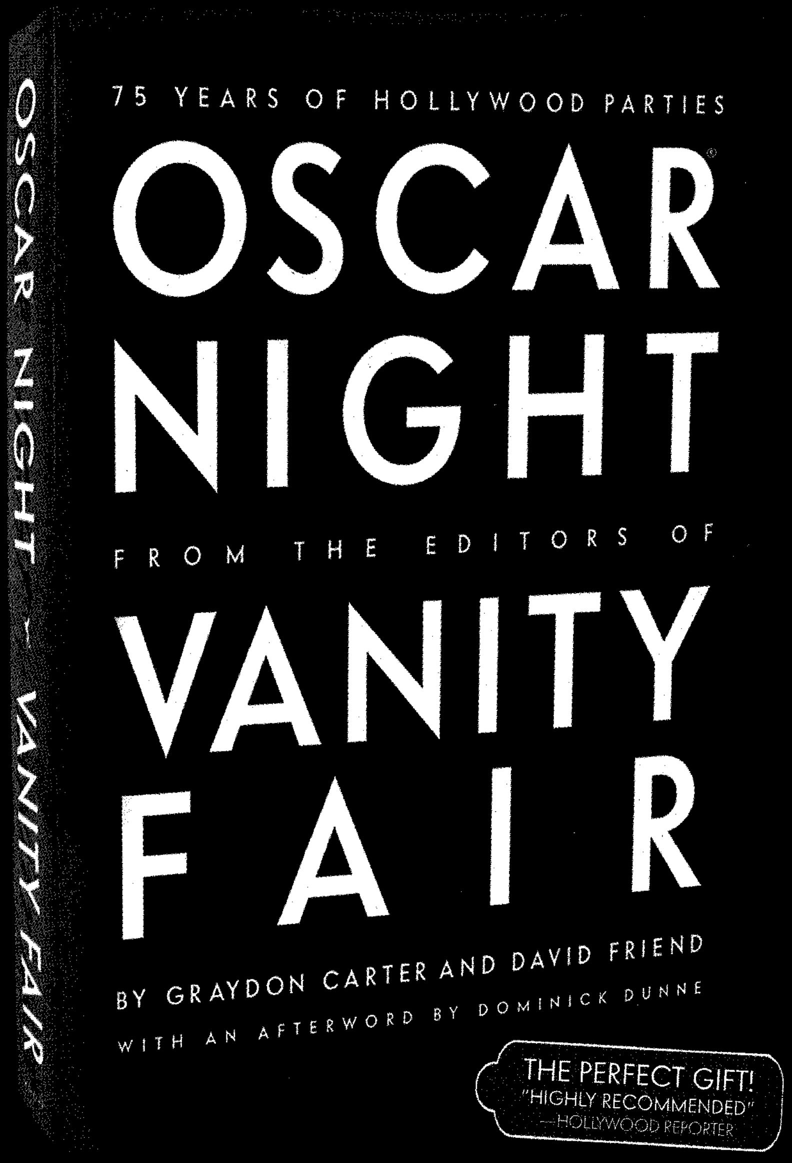

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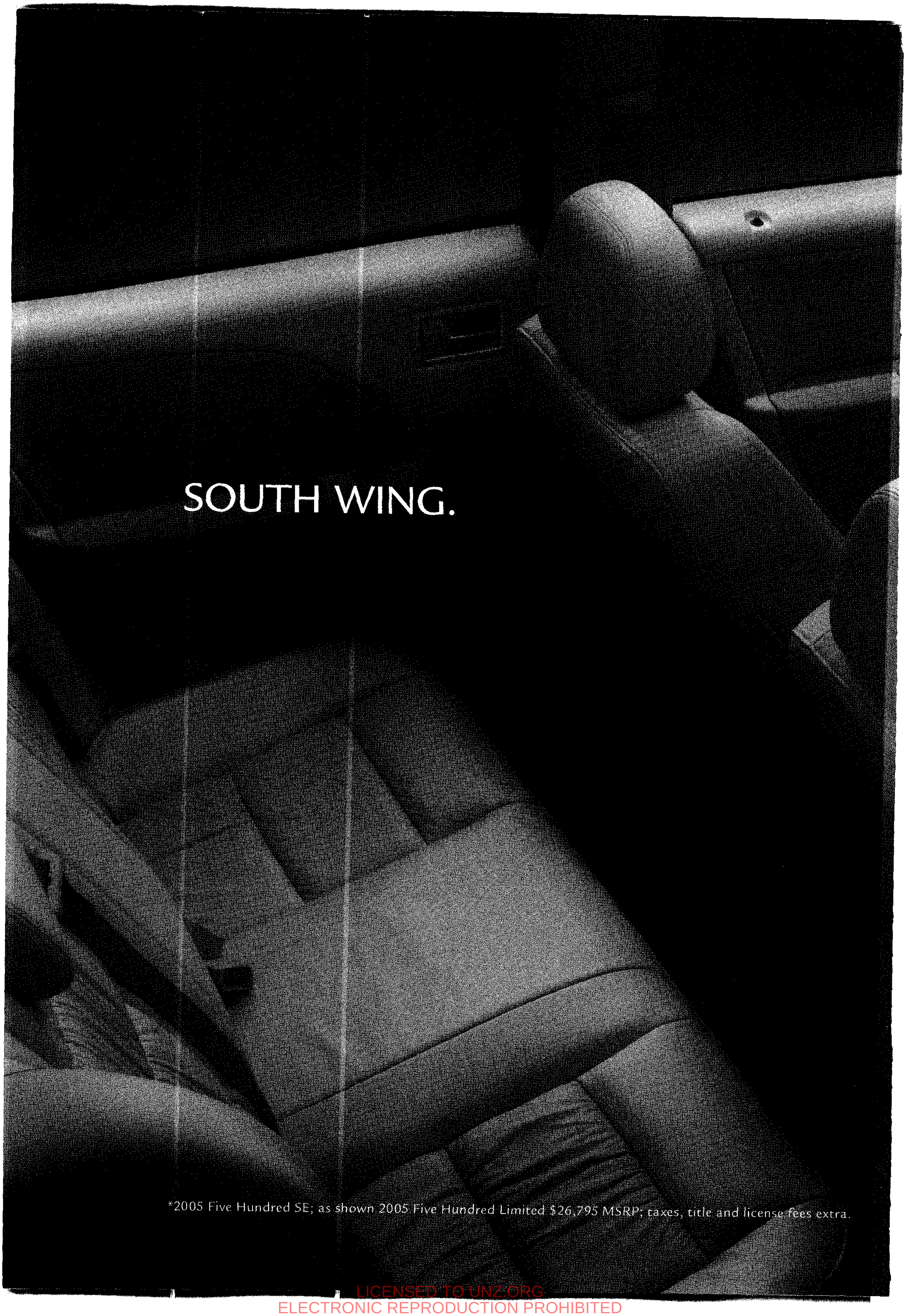

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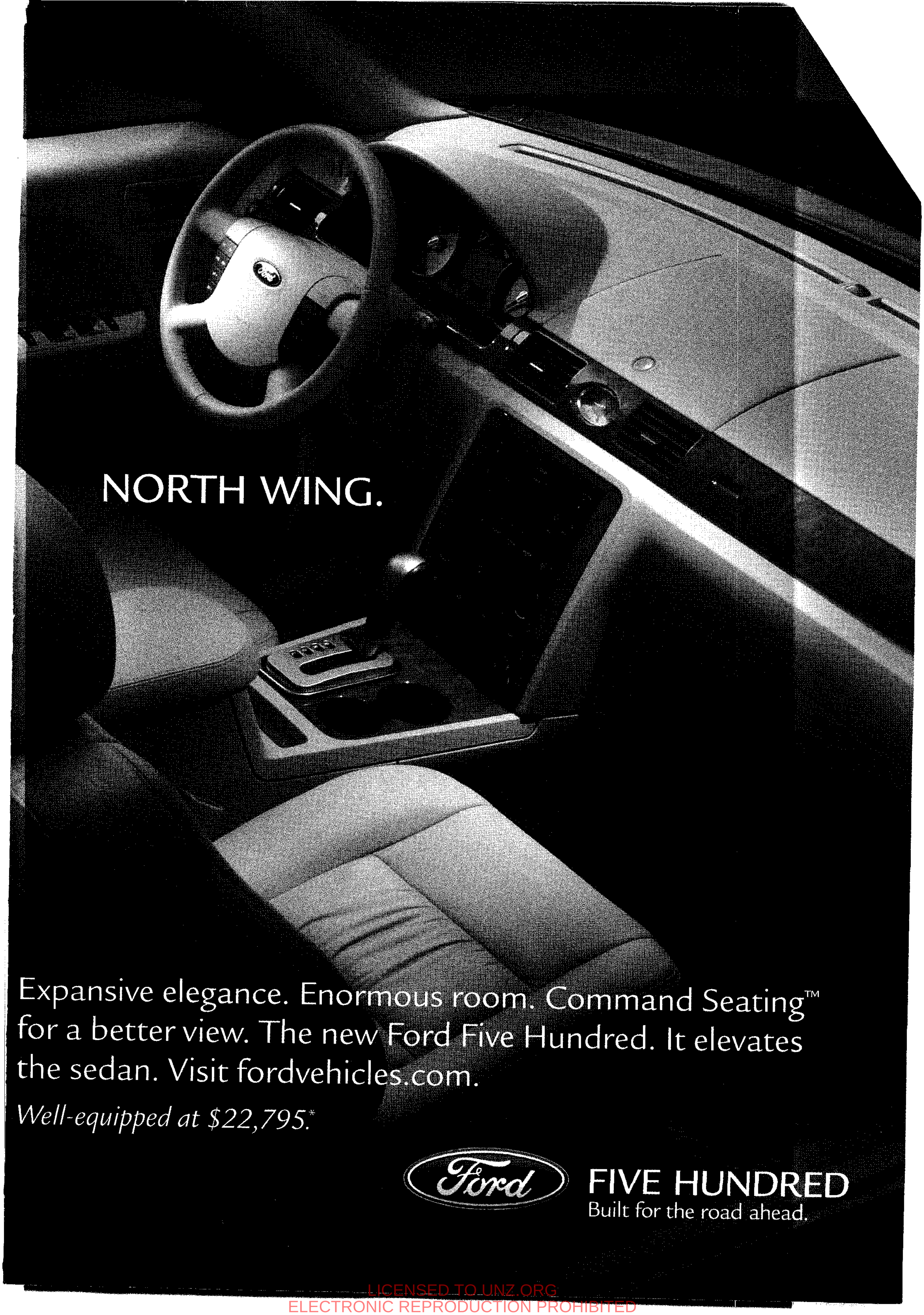

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